The reduction of metaphysics and the play of violence in the poetry of Wallace Stevens

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Abstract

The thesis demonstrates how Wallace Stevens' poetry utilises pre-Socratic philosophy in overcoming post-Kantian dislocation from the 'thing-in-itself'. I initially consider Stevens' poetry in terms of Hans-Georg Gadamer's ontological conception of the 'play' of art, an interactive existence overlooked by Kant. Through the 'play' of Stevens' poems the reading audience are implicated in their reduction to *being*. The origin of this conception leads Gadamer back to Parmenides who Stevens had read. I argue that Stevens' poetry 'plays' its audience into an ontological ground in an effort to show that his 'reduction of metaphysics' is not dry philosophical imposition, but is enacted by our encounter with the poems themselves.

Through an analysis of how the language and form of Stevens' poems attempt to reduce mind and world to concepts that parallel Parmenides' poetic sense of *being*, and Heraclitus' notion of *becoming*, the thesis uncovers the *ground* in which Stevens attempts a reconnection with the 'thing-in-itself'. It is through the experience of reconnecting to an ontological centre, which his poetry presents as *the* human project, that Stevens' poetry also presents itself as a means of replacing religion.

From here we turn to Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida for an exposition of how such a reduction reduces the 'Other' to 'otherness' and their worry that this reduction legitimates violence within the thought of Martin Heidegger and Parmenides. From this I make a case for how such reductions are connected to what I refer to as 'the play of violence' in Stevens' poetry, and to refer this violence back to the mythology Stevens' poetry shares with certain pre-Socratics and with Greek tragedy. This shows how such mythic rhythms are apparent within the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Heidegger and Gadamer, and how these rhythms release a poetic understanding of the violence of a 'reduction of metaphysics'.

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Introduction

Road Map

The following thesis will attempt to demonstrate how Wallace Stevens' poetry consciously enacts a 'reduction of metaphysics' to the conceptual first beginnings of the 'it is', as used by the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides of Elia, and 'flux', as found in the fragmentary writings of Heraclitus of Ephesus.[1] I will predominantly refer to the 'it is' under the more general term of *being*, while the term *becoming* will be used to describe 'flux'.[2] The thesis will investigate how the language and form of Stevens' ontologically conscious poetry generates a sense of these conceptions that arguably reduce metaphysics.[3] The analysis will also determine why the poetic philosophy of the pre-Socratics may prove attractive to the post-Kantian philosopher of art, or poet, in attempting to reconnect with the 'thing-in-itself'. The term 'reduction of metaphysics' is used in the sense Jacques Derrida

[1] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1930), pp. 173 & 139. I will primarily use Burnet as my source for direct quotations from the pre-Socratic fragments because it is the source that Stevens is known to have read. Burnet provides a translation of Parmenides' poem according to the arrangement of Hermann Diels (*Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker - The Fragments of the Pre-Socratics*, Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1903) and a version of Heraclitus' fragments according to the arrangement of Ingram Bywater (*Heracliti Ephesii Reliquiae*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1877). However, I will also be guided by the more contemporary translations of Jonathan Barnes (*The Presocratic Philosophers*, London & New York: Routledge, 1982) and Peter Kingsley (*Reality*, Inverness, CA: The Golden Sufi Centre, 2003).

[2] I will use the terms *being* and *becoming* to allow for the most encapsulating sense in which pre-Socratic concepts have been interpreted by subsequent philosophers and artists, while remaining faithful to the concepts found in the original pre-Socratic texts. For example, Julian Marias suggests that with Parmenides 'philosophy changes from physics to ontology', which Marias, like Martin Heidegger and Jonathan Barnes, refers to as *being*. (Julian Marias, *History of Philosophy*, trans. by Stanley Appelbaum & Clarence C Stowbridge (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1979, p. 24). Marias also uses the general term *becoming* for describing Heraclitus' conception that 'everything runs, *everything flows*', and again it is the succinct quality of the term *becoming* that I will make use of here. (Julian Marias, *History of Philosophy*, p. 27).

[3] By 'ontologically conscious poetry' I mean a poetry that is concerned with the nature of *being*. Unless otherwise stated the word 'ontology' is used in terms of: the branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature of *being* as such.

applies to the concept of *being*.[4] The term 'play' refers at once to Hans-Georg Gadamer's sense of 'play', as connecting ontologically with a work of art, and a 'play' in the sense of Greek tragic theatre.[5] The term thus implies Derrida's sense of 'play' as well by alluding to the oscillation between the two different senses of the word.[6]

The first chapter, entitled The Experience of the 'Thing-In-Itself' through an Ontological Art, begins by assessing the role of 'play' in Stevens' poetry according to Gadamer's terms. The point is to show that Stevens fulfils Gadamer's sense that an encounter with a work of art shows art to appear to have a truth-telling function, because its 'play' recalibrates our *being* when we encounter it as an audience.[7] This will allow us to begin with the language and form of Stevens' poetry to demonstrate how we as a reading audience are conceptually included in the 'reduction of metaphysics'. Stevens and Gadamer, like the post 'turn' (*Kehre*) Martin Heidegger, view poetry as a means of expressing *being*. My effort is to connect this idea with Stevens' consciousness of the pre-Socratics, and with Gadamer's sense that his theory in *Truth and Method* (1960) marks a return to pre-Socratic conceptions.[8]

Having shown that certain elements of Heraclitean philosophy and Parmenides' poetry of *being* are historical points of reference for Gadamer, and that Stevens was fully aware of them, the chapter attempts to establish how the language and form of Stevens' poetry is concerned to produce a sense of fundamental *being* and *becoming*, to which poetry *is also subject* as a 'thing-in-itself'. This reduction in Stevens' early poetry is presented as the centre into which Stevens' poetic 'play'

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[4] Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas', *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 81.
[5] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, second, revised edition, trans. revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London & New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 102.
[6] Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', *Writing and Difference*, pp. 278 - 293.
[7] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 102.
[8] Ibid., p. 456.

draws an audience on the ontological terms that Gadamer had suggested. The emphasis is not on providing a source-based connection between Stevens and the pre-Socratics. Rather it is to demonstrate how Pre-Socratic poetic philosophy was useful to post-Kantian philosophers of art, and poets, in experiencing the 'thing-in-itself'.

This analysis allows the thesis to plot Stevens' development while also engaging with debates concerning Stevens' debt to romanticism: whether he stands in a Kantian lineage, seen in a romantic light, as Simon Critchley argues in his *Things Merely Are - Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (2005), or is seeking to overcome Kant via the rhythms of Pre-Socratic poetic philosophy as I argue. The ontological perspective also allows the thesis to revisit Frank Lentricchia's argument, presented in his *Modernist Quartet* (1994), that Stevens is a socially detached aesthete. Contrary to this view I propose that a fundamental reduction of the social sphere to the Heraclitean sense that all is 'struggle' exists in Stevens, particularly in his 'committed writing' of the late 1930's and early 1940's.

Stevens' later phase is concerned with what he calls an 'accord with reality'.[9] I argue that this post-war poetry attempts to forge the physical and the metaphysical into the oneness of the vision of the 'rock', devoid of the fundamental 'struggle' and *becoming* of the disparate 'parts'. It is with the establishment of the 'rock' as a universal 'thing-in-itself' that Stevens' final poems are shown to be conscious of a re-composing out of the satisfaction of that vision of total oneness. The poems follow a Yeatsian pattern to a degree in that they look back to earlier creative moments, but they also present Stevens' 'earlier' poems as eternally connected to a

[9] A Letter to Charles Tomlinson, June 19th, 1951. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, selected and ed. by Holly Stevens (New York: University of California Press, 1966), p. 719.

sense of *being* as the universal ‘thing-in-itself’, of which all ‘historical’ things (and thus all poems) are presented as being part, in the eternal ‘now’. One of the key developments of Stevens’ poetry therefore is the transition from poems as ‘things in themselves’ subject to *being*, to all poems as part of the universal ‘thing-in-itself’ that is *being*. It is the dominance of the thought of *being* that produces the ‘reduction of metaphysics’ in Stevens’ poetry.

The second chapter is entitled Major Man and the Supreme Fiction: The Transvaluation of Religion with Poetry. Having demonstrated how Stevens raised the status of poetry to an expression of the 'truth' of *being*, through which the ‘thing-in-itself’ could be ‘experienced’ as a single *totality*, chapter two considers how Stevens used his ontological poetry to replace religion as the centre. The chapter argues that Stevens began his pursuit of the 'supreme fiction' and ‘major man’ in a post-Nietzschean world. However, I argue that the concept of 'major man' appears to most faithfully follow a Xenophanean model of un-grounding religion. Xenophanes had said that all deities were a projection of the imagination from the ego of man.[10] Stevens had said the same thing many times, which, since he had read Xenophanes, is not surprising perhaps.[11] I argue that Stevens' sense of 'major man' is comparable to an inversion of Xenophanes' philosophy. I show that Stevens collapses the imagined deity back into a renewed ‘idea’ of man (along with all things) and presents a sense of 'man' as the massiveness and extent of his own imaginings. Stevens is putting the ‘gods’ back into the mind of man (along with everything else)

[10] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 119.
[11] Wallace Stevens, ‘Two or Three Ideas’, *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: The Library of America, 1997), p. 846.

to create a totalizing 'immanence', which brings my argument close to that of David R. Jarraway, though I follow the Xenophanean model of 'immanence'.[12]

The analysis then extends the theory to investigate the idea of the 'supreme fiction' as an effort to create poetry out of existing poetry, just as Xenophanes says that man imagines gods to look like himself. This radical effort to un-ground religion is shown to owe much to George Santayana, whose comments on Xenophanes Stevens had read in *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900). As evidence is given that Stevens' sense of the 'rock' is presented as a replacement of the Biblical sense of Christ as 'The Rock', the chapter provides examples of how the 'supreme fiction' is a fiction grounded in Stevens' own conception of what the 'rock' is, namely a totalized sense of the here and now that has collapsed the physical and the metaphysical into a reductive oneness. As such 'major man' and the 'supreme fiction', founded upon Stevens' 'rock', become the means of 'healing' humanity from religious delusions by connecting them to the 'reality' of *being*.

The third chapter, entitled The Violence of a Reduction of Metaphysics in Wallace Stevens' Poetry, questions the effects of Stevens' radical 'reduction of metaphysics' to *being*, and his sense of a '*poesis*' as the means of uniting all things in *being*.[13] I use the thought of Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas who have written against a Heideggerian and Parmenidean sense of *being*, because they see it as a 'violent' reduction of the subjective 'Other' that is associated with primal myth.[14] For Levinas, the form of the 'face' precedes all ontologies and is always and already in

[12] David R. Jarraway, 'Stevens and Belief', *The Cambridge Companion To Wallace Stevens*, ed. by John N. Serio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 195.
[13] Wallace Stevens, 'Large Red Man Reading', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 365.
[14] Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas', *Writing and Difference*, pp. 79 - 97.

advance of any reduction, which if attempted, is violence.[15] The analysis attempts to show how the reductive elements in Stevens' poetry share the same characteristics as those found in Parmenidean poetry, and in Heidegger and Gadamer, and that they are without ethics.

Chapter four, entitled The Mythological Structure of Stevens' 'Rock', seeks to find reasons for the reductive violence associated with the concept of *being* as a 'oneness', from within its mythological history. The attempt is made to show that the mythology that underlies Stevens' sense of the 'rock' and Parmendes' sense of complete *being* is the same. Also that this mythology is the ultimate origin of the reductive violence associated with both ontological philosophy and Stevens' reductive poetry. Through an analysis of the Greek tragic references and structures in Stevens' poetry, in parallel with Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), the attempt is made to show how Stevens' sense of the 'rock' is comprised of what looks like a unifying of the Dionysian and the Apollonian 'art-worlds', in the oneness of the 'first idea', that is opened by a *poesis*. This model, which is shared by Attic Greek tragedy, is shown to correlate with the mythology that underlies Parmenides' conception of 'truth' and 'seeming' as united in the 'goddess', according to Heidegger.[16] The implications of this argument suggest that it is the mythological origin of Stevens' conception of *being* that explains the violence produced by a 'reduction of metaphysics', while also raising questions as to the extent that Heidegger had overcome Nietzschean philosophy as he said he had.

The conclusion considers that the language of Stevens' ontological poetry, and the implications of that poetry, can begin to be understood when placed in a pre-

[15] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 51.
[16] Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans. by André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 5.

Socratic context, a period when poetry and 'truth' were considered to be more synonymous. It is not surprising that 'violence' and reduction are at work in Stevens because *logos* is given up entirely to a ground of *mythos*, which itself has implications for post-Kantian philosophers of art who apply a truth-telling function to poetry.

Wallace Stevens and Pre-Socratic Poetic Philosophy

In her 1986 biography of Stevens, Joan Richardson pointed to the 'importance' of what she called the 'fainter notes from Heraclitus and the other pre-Socratics' in Stevens' work.[17] Bart Eeckhout has noted that though the connections between Stevens and the pre-Socratics are rarely mentioned in Stevens scholarship, they account for 'an important part of the poet's intellectual background.'[18] In a letter of 1940 Stevens, at the age of sixty one recalls how: 'When I was young and reading right and left, Max Müller was the conspicuous Orientalist of the day'.[19] The Oriental context may be accounted for by Müller's translation of the *Rig-Veda* (1849 – 1874) and *The Sacred Books of the East* (1879). However, Müller had also written in detail on the Pre-Socratics in his *Lectures on the Science of Language* (1864), making reference to intricate aspects of the writings of Empedocles, Anaxagoras, Heraclitus, Xenophanes and Pythagoras. Richardson has observed that in his speculative writing, *The Science of Thought* (1887), Müller 'postulated a purely linguistic basis for any future philosophy, looking back to the early Greek

[17] Joan Richardson, *Wallace Stevens A Biography: The Early Years, 1879 – 1923* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1986), p. 24.
[18] Bart Eeckhout, 'Stevens and Philosophy', *The Cambridge Companion To Wallace Stevens*, p. 107.
[19] A Letter to Leonard C. van Geyzel, December 9th, 1940. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 381. Stevens' reading of Max Müller and his referencing him in this letter of 1940 has been mentioned by Joan Richardson in an essay entitled 'Wallace Stevens: A Likeness', collected with a number of essays on Stevens published in 2007 (*The Cambridge Companion To Wallace Stevens*, pp. 12 - 13.)

philosophers who, in their study of *Logos*, made no separation between language and thought.'[20] In the letter of 1940 recalling his reading of Müller, Stevens assumes that his correspondent, Leonard van Geyzel, 'must know his [Müller's] things'.[21]

In view of Stevens' conscious use of the term *being*, much has been written with regard to Stevens and the twentieth century thinker, Martin Heidegger. For example, Krzysztof Ziarek's essay entitled "'Without human meaning': Stevens, Heidegger and the Foreignness of Poetry", collected in *Wallace Stevens Across the Atlantic* (2008), Paul A. Bové's *Destructive Poetics: Heidegger and Modern American Poetry* (1980), and Thomas J. Hines' reflections on *The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens: Phenomenological Parallels with Husserl and Heidegger* (1976). The British literary critic, Frank Kermode, has also addressed the question of Heidegger and Stevens in 'Dwelling Poetically in Connecticut', from *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration* (1980). J. Hillis Miller, an early champion of Stevens' abilities as a poet, was among the first to consider Stevens' notable consciousness and use of the word *being*. Hillis Miller offered several analyses of Stevens, early in his career, which show the influence of Heidegger, such as his essay entitled 'Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Being', from *The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (1965), as well as in his work entitled *Poets of Reality* (1965).

However, a direct influence of Heidegger on Stevens which would account for his consciousness of the concept of *being* seems impossible, as Hines duly notes.[22] Stevens mentions Heidegger in a late letter to Paule Vidal, referring to him as 'the Swiss philosopher', which seems to terminate the possibility of a source-

[20] Joan Richardson, 'Wallace Stevens: A Likeness', *The Cambridge Companion To Wallace Stevens*, p. 12.
[21] A Letter to Leonard C. van Geyzel, December 9th, 1940. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 381.
[22] Thomas J. Hines, *The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens - Phenomenological Parallels with Husserl and Heidegger* (New Jersey & London: Associated University Presses, 1976), pp. 23 - 24.

based reading.[23] The connections between Stevens and the father of 'ontology' (the branch of metaphysics that deals with *being* as such), Parmenides, are more concrete. In a letter of 1944 to José Rodríguez Feo Stevens said that he had been 'fortunate enough' to procure a copy of John Burnet's *Early Greek Philosophy* (1892), and by 6th April 1945, he had read it. Richardson suggests that 'Stevens would follow Müller's lead, carefully reading the contributions of the pre-Socratics'.[24] In the letter of 6th April 1945 Stevens mentioned that Burnet's account had 'said all there is to say in respect to the supremacy of a figure like Parmenides'.[25]

In reading Burnet, Stevens would have read the fragmentary remains of the whole period of pre-Socratic philosophy, considering that their remaining works are not vast volumes, but short treatises, often, as with Parmenides, written in verse. And herein is the question that I initially wish to pursue, why does Stevens think that Parmenides is supreme? Stevens is no builder of philosophical systems in verse, not a 'philosopher hiding in poet's laurels': he is an artist, first and foremost.[26] He just happens to be, along with T.S. Eliot, the most 'philosophically' inclined Anglophone poet of the twentieth century. Stevens continues his appraisal of Parmenides by saying that 'Burnet says he was the only philosopher to write his system in verse'.[27] Here, it seems, is the key to Stevens' appraisal of Parmenides, in the meeting of the philosophic and the poetic. It is upon the threshold between philosophy and poetry that Stevens seems content to operate, for his own part, always appearing to move

[23] A Letter to Paule Vidal, July 29th, 1952. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 758.
[24] Joan Richardson, 'Wallace Stevens: A Likeness', *The Cambridge Companion To Wallace Stevens*, p. 12.
[25] A Letter to José Rodríguez Feo, April 6th, 1945. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 495.
[26] Thomas J. Hines, *The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens - Phenomenological Parallels with Husserl and Heidegger*, p. 18.
[27] A Letter to José Rodríguez Feo, April 6th, 1945. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 495.

from philosophy towards poetry. As Stevens himself observes, 'I like my philosophy smothered in beauty and not the opposite.'[28]

In his 1951 Moody Lecture entitled 'A Collect of Philosophy', given at the University of Chicago, Stevens stated that: 'A poem in which the poet has chosen for his subject a philosophic theme should result in the poem of poems. That the wing of poetry should also be the rushing wing of meaning seems to be an extreme aesthetic good.'[29] This is a telling statement, showing that both philosophy and poetry are interdependent for Stevens' sense of 'an extreme aesthetic good'. There is no doubt that it is the aesthetic, the artistic, that Stevens is seeking, but the way in which that should come to fruition is reliant upon philosophic 'meaning', for the 'good' of the art, for its elevation.

Parmenides was writing his philosophy concerning nature and *being*, truth and opinion (seeming) in poetic form. This, it would seem, is a very early example of the happy coexistence of poetry and philosophy, prior to Plato's famous rending in *Protagoras*. Andrew Bowie is not the first to consider that: "Questions about 'poetry' and literature are in fact inseparably connected to the history of Western philosophy".[30] Yet Parmenides pre-dates Plato, pre-dates the division of art and philosophy at this particular juncture, and may, thereby, provide an example of how those two sometime strangers could dwell together.

Stevens would have had further encounters with the pre-Socratics, at some level, within the pages of Arthur Kenyan Rogers' *A Students History of Philosophy* (1908) and in Matthew Arnold's *Notebooks* (1902). However a direct source-based

[28] Milton J. Bates, "Stevens' Books at the Huntington: An Annotated Checklist," *Wallace Stevens Journal* 2.3/4 (1978), p. 50.
[29] Wallace Stevens, 'A Collect of Philosophy', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 854.
[30] Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory – The Philosophy of German Literary Theory* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 1.

reading of Stevens' consciousness of *being* as derived from the pre-Socratics still seems impossible. Despite having read the works of the pre-Socratics, even encountering them 'as a young man' through Max Müller's writings and in the works of George Santayana, who Stevens knew personally from Harvard, too many other philosophies in the thousands of intervening years, many of which are known to have been familiar to Stevens, have had opportunity to colour the philosophical ideas of the pre-Socratics.

For example, the concept of *becoming*, which I intend to treat as the second reductive notion in Stevens, has its philosophical origin with Heraclitus, who Burnet deals with at length. However, Stevens has also read Nietzsche extensively, as B.J. Leggett's work entitled *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext* (1992) makes clear. The concept of fundamental *becoming*, relieved of its Hegelian baggage and prized highly by Nietzsche, is evident throughout Stevens' poetry. Stevens, we know, has read both Nietzsche and Heraclitus, but the extent to which he is *using* one or the other as a consistent source, short of the instances of direct quotation or paraphrase, becomes a matter of subjective opinion, which inevitably evokes mis-readings. For example, when Stevens says in 'This Solitude of Cataracts', a poem collected in *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950): 'He never felt twice the same about the flecked river', it seems, as Eleanor Cook suggests, to be a 'Textbook example of the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, "You never step twice into the same river," i.e., the world is governed by perpetual flux.'[31] However, when Stevens consistently applies the *general* notion of flux or *becoming* throughout his poetry, we cannot *know* that

[31] Eleanor Cook, *A Reader's Guide to Wallace Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 245.

Heraclitus was the ultimate source, as opposed to Nietzsche or perhaps Henri Bergson, of whom again Stevens shows awareness.[32]

For that reason I will deal more generally with the concepts of *being* and *becoming* as they are consciously evoked through the creation of Stevens' poetry, pointing to possible sources that present themselves along the way, while remaining conscious of their origin in pre-Socratic poetic philosophy. In this sense the pre-Socratic conceptions provide a *model* for dealing with Stevens as a post-Kantian poet, who is conscious of the relationship of *being* and art. This reliance upon pre-Socratic thought as a tool for questioning the point of relationship between *being* and art will also remain open to pre-Socratic ideas in the hands of post-Kantian philosophers and poets, with whom Stevens is known to have been familiar.

To guide the fundamental pre-Socratic thought I intend to use Burnet and Müller, as examples of sources Stevens had encountered, in conjunction with more contemporary commentators on that period, such as W.K.C. Guthrie, Julian Marias, Jonathan Barnes and Peter Kingsley. In terms of post-Kantian sources that deal with the pre-Socratics at some level, particularly in relation to art, I will mainly engage with F.W.J Schelling, Friedrich Hölderlin, George Santayana, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jean-Luc Nancy and Gianni Vattimo, with critical input derived from Theodor Adorno, Jacques Derrida and Emanuel Levinas.

Wallace Stevens and Pre-Socratic Terminology

As we progress in the analysis of Stevens and Pre-Socratic poetic philosophy, I will make use of the same terms that Stevens would have had access to in Müller

[32] For an exposition of Stevens and Bergson, see: Temenuga Trifonova. "The Poetry of Matter: Stevens and Bergson." *Wallace Stevens Journal* 26.1 (Spring 2002): 41-69.

and Burnet. For example, Müller had used the conception of *phusis* as the origin of language for Heraclitus, as opposed to *thesei*:

When we are told that the principle difference of opinion that separated the philosophers of old with regard to the nature and origin of language is expressed by the two words *phusei* and *thesei*, 'naturally' and 'conventionally', we learn very little from such terms. We must know the history of those words, which were watchwords in every school of philosophy, before they dwindled down to mere technical terms.[33]

The chapters ahead will investigate how seriously Stevens may have attempted to unearth the pre-Socratic concept of *phusis* (nature), as designating the 'nature and origin of language' and to rescue it from becoming a 'mere technical' term.

Jonathan Barnes, a prominent pre-Socratic scholar, says of the term *phusis* that: "The noun derives from a verb meaning 'to grow'."[34] However, the definition of *phusis* can include 'Trees and plants and snakes (and perhaps also rain and clouds and mountains)'.[35] Yet in another sense "the word 'nature' designates the sum of natural objects and natural events; in this sense to discourse on nature or *peri phuseos* is to talk about the whole natural world - *phusis* and *kosmos* come to the same thing."[36] It is in this wider sense that Heidegger seems to have interpreted *phusis,* and his definitions are useful for highlighting the breadth that the term held for the early Greek philosophers. In his lecture series, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, presented at the University of Freiburg in the summer semester of 1935, Heidegger defines *phusis* as:

the emerging sway, and the enduring over which it thoroughly holds sway. This emerging, abiding sway includes both "becoming" as well as "Being" in the

[33] Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language Vol II* (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1871), pp. 332 - 333.
[34] Jonathan Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1987), p. xx.
[35] Ibid., p. xxi.
[36] Ibid., p. xxi.

narrower sense of fixed continuity. *Phusis* is the event of *standing forth*, arising from the concealed and thus enabling the concealed to take its stand for the first time.[37] Heidegger further suggests that, '*phusis* originally means both heaven and earth, both the stone and the plant, both the animal and the human, and human history as the work of the gods; and finally and first of all, it means the gods who themselves stand under destiny.'[38] Though Heidegger strongly re-reads the pre-Socratics, the term *phusis*, defined as the 'arising from the concealed' that is akin to *kosmos*, would certainly have been available to Stevens from his reading of Müller and Burnet.

As we progress we will continue to read through the language and form of Stevens' poetry to evaluate the extent to which other terms and debates, comparable to pre-Socratic thought, may be at work in Stevens' oeuvre. It seems logical to begin where others have already sensed that such terminology may be in use. Touching upon the perennial mind/world epistemological debate in Stevens scholarship, Hillis Miller has suggested that: 'Stevens uses the word "idea" in its original meaning of "direct sense image."'[39] For the Greeks in the days before Plato, the term *eidos* was used to describe exactly that, a 'direct sense image', an appearance, and was not indicative of a merely subjective 'idea' born in the mind. I will question as to what Stevens may have meant by the phrase, 'ideas of order', in light of his pre-Socratic knowledge.

The study ahead will allude to other pre-Socratic terms and debates, such as the apparent tensions between *phusis* and *nomos* (nature and culture) and between *tuche* and *technê* (chaos/chance and art/skill). In the pre-Socratic writings the term *phusis* (as 'nature') is also often contrasted with the term *technê* (art/skill). Barnes

[37] Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. by Gregory Fried & Richard Polt (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 16.
[38] Ibid., p. 16.
[39] J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1966), p. 248.

confirms that the pre-Socratics make a 'distinction between nature and artifice (in the Greek between *phusis* and *technê*)'.[40] Heidegger's more radical interpretation suggests that *technê* is the practice of art, as a kind of knowledge, not because it involves "technical" skills, tools and materials, but:

> because art, in a distinctive sense, brings Being to stand and to manifestation in the work as a being, art may be regarded as the ability to set to work, pure and simple, as *technē*. Setting-to-work is putting Being to work *in* beings, a putting-to-work that opens up. This opening-up and keeping open, which surpasses and puts to work, is knowing.[41]

Again, as we proceed in the enquiry ahead I will entertain the definitions of both Barnes and Heidegger, in attempting to encompass the sense in which this debate may be consciously evoked through the language and form of Stevens' poetry. Indeed, we will need to question as to whether it is *really* the strains of this pre-Socratic debate of *technê* verses *phusis* that we can hear in Stevens' own art, for example in this famous example?:

> I placed a jar in Tennessee,
> And round it was, upon a hill.
> It made the slovenly wilderness
> Surround that hill.[42]

The Greek term *archê* is also integral to the pre-Socratics and has an affiliation with *phusis* for them. The term means 'beginning' or 'origin', though it is sometimes used in the sense of 'to rule' or 'to govern'.[43] Barnes suggests that the term *archê* is 'apt, providing the reader keeps in mind the Latin etymology of the English word: a principle is a *principium* or a beginning.'[44] The pre-Socratics applied the term to the universe as a *whole*: 'an inquiry into the principles of the cosmos is

[40] Jonathan Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. xxi.
[41] Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 170.
[42] Wallace Stevens, 'Anecdote of the Jar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 60.
[43] Jonathan Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. xxii.
[44] Ibid., p. xxii.

thereby an inquiry into the fundamental constituents of all natural objects.'[45] John Miles, in a 1998 article in *The Wallace Stevens Journal* (that refers to Barnes), has raised the fact that questions 'about the nature of things' within Stevens 'are the questions with which the pre-Socratic philosophers began their treatises.'[46] Parmenides and Heraclitus speak of concepts akin to *being* and *becoming* as the *archê* of *phusis*. An *archê* then can be viewed as a 'first idea' and I will suggest that Stevens' own sense of the 'first idea' closely resembles the pre-Socratic sense of *archê*.

However, the *archê* conceived by Parmenides and Heraclitus reveal deeper nuances that also appear to parallel the structure of Stevens' poetics. For example, in his poem 'On Nature' (*peri phuseos*), Parmenides had described the way of *aletheia* (truth) and the way of *doxa* (seeming/opinion), both of which are proposed as parts of the 'it is' of complete reality. The key here is that seeming (*doxa*) can be read as having been elevated to the 'truth' of Parmenidean *being*, on the basis that whatever is in *being* is 'true'.[47] For Parmenides, and perhaps Heidegger also, what seems so is in *being*, and because *being* is 'truth', seeming (or in Stevens' own terms the imagination), is considered to be a legitimate part of 'reality'. Such a perspective becomes useful for assessing how Stevens attempts to connect the imagination and reality through a *poesis*, in terms reminiscent of Parmenides' poem.

Heraclitus' view of *phusis* extends beyond a mere *archê* of *becoming*. He had also left fragments that suggested a more fundamental level of universal struggle, stating that: 'Men do not know how what is at variance agrees with itself. It is an

[45] Ibid., p. xxii.
[46] John Miles, 'An Encounter with the Firecat: Wallace Stevens' "Earthy Anecdote"', *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, Vol. 22 No. 2 (Fall 1998), pp. 116 – 132.
[47] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 174.

attunement of opposite tensions, like that of the bow and the lyre.'[48] Heraclitus' word for 'attunement' is *harmoniē*, which suggests a *harmonious struggle*. He had said that: 'Homer was wrong in saying: "Would that strife might perish from among gods and men!" He did not see that he was praying for the destruction of the universe; for, if his prayer were heard, all things would pass away.' [49] Gregory Fried, in a work entitled *Heidegger's Polemos – From Being to Politics* (2000), quotes from Charles Khan as follows:

> Homer and Hesiod, the pre-eminent wise men and teachers of the Greeks, represent the general folly of mankind in failing to perceive the "unapparent *harmoniē*" in which the tension between opposing powers is as indispensible as the reconciliation within a larger unity.[50]

Heraclitus had also said that 'war is the father of all and the king of all'.[51] Heraclitus' word for 'war' is *polemos*, which is 'one of the key concepts in understanding Presocratic thought', and it means 'strife' or 'struggle'.[52] As we progress in the analysis we will investigate the extent to which Stevens' poetry engages with a concept like the Heraclitean *polemos*, in order to depict a universal *harmoniē* of struggle between the imagination and reality, particularly in times of world war.

Reading Stevens' Poetry of *Being*

A tremendous amount of material has been written concerning the notable emphasis in Stevens' poetry upon the concept of *being*. Roger Gilbert has maintained that there are 2,997 verbs of *being* in Stevens' *Collected Poems* (1954)

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[48] Ibid., p. 136.
[49] Ibid., p. 136.
[50] Gregory Fried, *Heidegger's Polemos – From Being to Politics* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 22 – 23.
[51] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 136.
[52] Mihai I. Spariosu, *God of Many Names – Play, Poetry and Power in Hellenic Thought From Homer to Aristotle* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 58.

out of a total word count of 80,772, making one in every twenty seven words in the collection some form of ‘to be’.[53] The question of the relationship of poetry and *being* raises a key issue which Timothy Clark has addressed admirably in his work, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot - Sources of Derrida's Notion and Practice of Literature* (1992). Clark argues that Heidegger's transformation of 'art' to 'truth', through an interpretation of poetry as the manifestation of 'true' philosophy in his later phase, changes a reading of literature. This change detaches art from 'the reductive notions of "feeling", "creative genius", "aesthetic consciousness" dominant in the neo-Kantian tradition of aesthetics.'[54] A Heideggerian reading changes *Dichtung* (poetry, fiction) to 'a mode in which truth "happens".'[55] In taking account of the neo-Kantian concerns and attempting to engage with Stevens' poetry through questions of its "aesthetic consciousness", my intention is, *to some extent,* to divert from a Heideggerian reading that transforms the meaning of language as the 'imitator of the signifier' to that which '*summons to presence* that which it names, a force that brings the apparent into its own to stand unconcealed before us.'[56]

Clark clearly states the issues of what must be carefully handled in the case ahead, if aesthetic concerns are not to be quashed in the pursuit of a reading that gives priority to poetry as the unveiling of *being* over literature itself:

> A Heideggerian reading, therefore, could not or should not argue or reach conclusions *about* a poem in the manner of representational thought, affirming *a*, and denying *b* etc. On the contrary, the way into the question of language must become a transformation of this path itself.[57]

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[53] Roger Gilbert, ‘Verbs of Mere Being: A Defense of Stevens’ Style’, *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, Vol. 28 No. 2 (Fall 2004), p. 193.
[54] Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot – Sources of Derrida’s Notion and Practice of Literature* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 24.
[55] Ibid., p. 24.
[56] Ibid., p. 28.
[57] Ibid., p. 46.

However, Stevens' poetry shares a very similar view to the relationship of poetry and *being* as that advocated by Heidegger, and expressed in the ontological poetry of Parmenides; namely that poetry, through the making of an appearance (*poesis*), is the appropriate mode for the expression of *being*. Such a conception is more overt in Stevens' later poetry, though I will argue that it was there in essence from the beginning. In terms of the later poetry, Stevens writes the following in 'Large Red Man Reading', collected in *The Auroras of Autumn*:

> as he sat there reading, from out of the purple
> tabulae,
> The outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its
> law:
> *Poesis*, *poesis*, the literal characters, the vatic lines[58]

This raises hugely important concerns for how we should read Stevens in view of Clark's assessment of a Heideggerian reading. My intention is to begin by reading Stevens through the presentation of language and form, but only as a means for elucidating the ground of Stevens' poetry, to ascertain if it is a consciousness of the thought of *being* that determines why Stevens' poems crystallize themselves in the forms in which we have them. We will further investigate, as I have suggested, if this sense of *being* owes more to the historical translation of pre-Socratic concepts than specifically to Heidegger. Heidegger is entertained here as a post-Kantian phenomenological ontologist, who was concerned with art and profoundly influenced by the pre-Socratics.

This leads us to the question of how to read Stevens in a wider sense than just in terms of the relationship of poetry and *being*, or if indeed it is possible to read Stevens accurately at all. Hillis Miller in an essay written in his more de

[58] Wallace Stevens, 'Large Red Man Reading', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 365.

Manian/Derridian period, 'Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure', collected in *Theory Now and Then* (1991), has suggested that the activity of criticism only adds to 'the Rock' (as he interprets it), that criticism only adds another strand to the textual web of which poetry is part.[59] In this essay Hillis Miller defines two essential types of critic, the 'Socratic, theoretical, or canny critics' on the one hand, as opposed to the 'uncanny' critics such as one of Stevens' foremost canonical readers, Harold Bloom, as well as Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy on the other. The latter are seen as adding to 'the Rock', making new insights which only add to the labyrinth of the text. The easy part, for Hillis Miller, is getting into that labyrinth; the hard part is getting out.[60] Similarly, Bloom in his *Map of Misreading* suggests that a strong reading 'is always a misreading'.[61]

In arguing that Stevens shows an awareness of *being* and that this impacts the language and form selected, it will first be necessary to read *through* the language and form of the poetry in order to sketch the ground from which I will argue the poems emerge. If we do not read through the poems, then we are in danger of negating the literary aspect, while applying a psychologically *knowing* reading, which is of little value. Just as Gadamer is critical of Friedrich Schleiermacher for his psychologically knowing hermeneutics, so we will initially use Gadamer's thought in investigating the concept of 'play' in Stevens, in order to demonstrate how the reader stands in respect to 'understanding' Stevens' poetry.[62] This type of reading, influenced by Heidegger, will seek to uncover ways in which Stevens demonstrates consciousness of his reader reading. The analysis will aim to bring us into view of the point at which ontology and art are interfacing in Stevens.

[59] J. Hillis Miller, *Theory Now and Then* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 123.
[60] Ibid., p. 122.
[61] Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 3.
[62] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 158 – 159.

As Jean-Luc Nancy suggests, it is art that touches us and it is through Gadamer's understanding of the ways in which poems connect with us, that we will be able to uncover the 'understanding' of the poems.[63]

[63] Ibid., p. xxviii.

Chapter One

The Experience of the 'Thing-In-Itself' through an Ontological Art

The Ontological Experience of the Work of Art

In his *magnum opus, Truth and Method*, Gadamer attempts to restore truth to aesthetics. His move towards this function is in response to Kant's 'radical subjectivization' of aesthetics. Kant's key position in the *Critique of Judgement* (1790) considered that if we judge something to be beautiful or sublime, we expect others to share our conception.[64] However, if the aesthetic is distinct from scientific truth-telling, as mere expression, then how can it be possible to demonstrate that others should share our judgement that something *has* aesthetic value? If science is the arbiter of truth and art merely an expression, as Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey both suggest, then any judgement of the work of art will be subjective, and lack the general validity of science. Gadamer, in a strain of thought that originates with Heidegger, seeks to enlarge the sense of 'hermeneutics' from that of a method or science, rooted in psychologism and a historicism defined by relativism, to a universal hermeneutics of *experience*.

With Gadamer, the experience of a work of art becomes an event of ontological understanding, 'understanding belongs to the being of that which is understood'.[65] Gadamer seeks to demonstrate that the work of art is capable of truth-telling by drawing attention to the concept of 'play', a concept that a subjectivization of the work of art negates. The 'play' of a work of art is 'the mode of being of the

[64] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. by J.H. Bernard (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2005), p. 54.
[65] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. xxviii.

work of art itself.'[66] 'Play' is not what the artist once placed into the work of art it is what gets up out of the dark every time we encounter a work of art. 'Play' places something new into the world and subsequently it puts us into 'play'. We are played by the work of art, which for Gadamer, has the effect of reconstructing our *being*.

William E. McMahon, in a work entitled *The Higher Humanism of Wallace Stevens* (1990), suggests that important connections 'exist between Stevens and Gadamer'.[67] McMahon considers that 'Gadamer, like Stevens, has chosen to make a harmonious nest on the ragged contours of modern experience.'[68] Though pointing to the similarities that exist between Stevens and Gadamer, McMahon does not build a case that demonstrates their affinities, particularly with reference to the concept of 'play' as the mode of *being* of the work of art. It is to this objective that I now wish to turn, to demonstrate how the 'beauty' in which Stevens smothers his 'philosophy', is in Gadamer's terms, itself philosophically orientated. Further that this 'play' of consciously placing something new into the world is designed to bind the audience into the philosophy that Stevens says lies beneath the beauty. This 'philosophy' is not dry discourse or trite aphorism; it is presented as *being* as such, expressed through language, form and direct meaning. I will initially argue on a thematic rather than on a chronological basis that as the artist, Stevens consciously *plays* his audience into connection with the ontological ground of his poetry, by utilizing a range of art forms.

McMahon considers that:

It would be difficult to find a modern writer who more perfectly reflects Gadamer's ideas than Stevens, and Gadamer helps us understand why Stevens moved in brazen

[66] Ibid., p. 102.
[67] Willam E. McMahon, *The Higher Humanism of Wallace Stevens – Studies in American Literature Volume Twelve* (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), p. 156.
[68] Ibid., p. 156.

optimism with no sense at all of any impasse or paralysis in finding an authentic connection between reality and thought or between life and poetry.[69]

I would argue that through his use of 'play', Stevens includes his audience in the connection of 'reality and thought and life and poetry'. Stevens actively connects his audience in the 'play' of art by ensuring that his own poetry becomes a stage for presenting a range of art forms such as music, painting, language and theatre. Equally, for Gadamer, the concept of 'play' is not limited to a particular art form, but is necessarily indiscriminate. Poetry for Stevens can become a stage upon which to act out the 'play' of art.

For Gadamer, it is the example of theatre that serves to demonstrate how the audience participates in the 'communion of being present'[70]:

> Thus it is not really the absence of a fourth wall that turns the play into a show. Rather, openness toward the spectator is part of the closedness of the play. The audience only completes what the play as such is.[71]

In 'Of Modern Poetry', collected in *Parts of a World* (1942) Stevens opens poetry up as a theatre, playing an instrument that sounds 'two/ Emotions becoming one':

> It has
> To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage
> And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
> With meditation, speak words that in the ear,
> In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
> Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound
> Of which, an invisible audience listens,
> Not to the play, but to itself, expressed
> In an emotion as of two people, as of two
> Emotions becoming one. The actor is
> A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
> An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives
> Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly

[69] Ibid., p. 156.
[70] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 128.
[71] Ibid., p. 109.

Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
Beyond which it has no will to rise.[72]

We will analyse Stevens' 'modern poetry' in more detail in due course. For now it is enough to note that it must 'construct a new stage' and act out a 'play', speaking words and sounding notes that 'play' 'two' together as 'one'. The audience are included in that connection, fixed in the sounding of the 'wiry string' that 'plays' the fiction of poetry together with reality. Modern poetry, expressed as language, acting and music is considered to be a means of accessing a metaphysical 'oneness'. The 'play' of art to which the audience listens connects them into that same ground of 'oneness'. However, the audience listens not to the play, but to themselves, because what is being played is the unity of which they are already a part. The role of 'modern poetry' for Stevens is to awaken people to that ontological unity by *playing*.

The 'metaphysician' behind this performance is presented as playing a guitar to achieve the 'oneness'. Music itself is one of the key elements of Stevens' 'play' and its effect is seen to be a conscious effort to ontologically bind the subjective and the objective in 'becoming one'. For Stevens, who played the guitar as a young man, the 'blue guitar', like the 'banjo' of 'Banjo Boomer', or the 'oboe' of 'Asides on the Oboe', is a means of connection. The power of Stevens' 'blue guitar', the earliest of these three instruments, was to bring together opposites: Specifically, to fuse the imagination and reality. 'Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz', a poem collected in *Ideas of Order* (1936) that laments the death of Hoon's music, had predicted the 'blue guitar' as a means of uniting opposites. Here, the will to find a uniting music is assertive:

Some harmonious skeptic soon in a skeptical music

Will unite these figures of men and their shapes

[72] Wallace Stevens, 'Of Modern Poetry', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 219.

Will glisten again with motion, the music
Will be motion and full of shadows.[73]

Stevens advocates that the familiar shape or notion of 'men' 'Will' (must) be merged in the unity of 'music' (art), and the question of what a human 'is' becomes opaque once again ('full of shadows'). When 'Blue Guitar' opens, Stevens is bent over this instrument of the 'imagination' like a 'shearsman of sorts'.[74] His very first thought in the poem is to 'patch' 'reality' together into one thing and achieve the 'oneness' that the poet desires.[75]

The image of the 'blue guitar' also fuses the art forms of music and painting. Bonnie Costello confirms that Stevens had quoted Picasso in the poem and appears to describe 'Picasso's early (pre-cubist) painting of *The Old Guitarist* ("I sing a hero's head, large eye")'.[76] However, the 'blue guitar' is not just a symbol of music and painting, but also of the 'imagination', as a modern descendent of the Æolian harp and the Orphic lute. It is Stevens who 'plays' this 'instrument' in order to 'patch' 'reality'.

In 'It Must Change' from 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' (1942), the references to music increase as the poet 'plays' of change, or the absence of change in moments of hiatus. In Gadamer's sense of 'play', Stevens' playing has the effect of gathering his audience into an ontological relationship with the constancy of the change under scrutiny. The poems of 'It Must Change' reference the 'booming' of 'bees'[77]; 'a deep echo in a horn'[78]; 'at the final funeral,/ The music halted and the

[73] Wallace Stevens, 'Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 101.
[74] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 135.
[75] Ibid., p. 135.
[76] Bonnie Costello, 'Stevens and Painting', *The Cambridge Companion To Wallace Stevens*, p. 171.
[77] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 337.
[78] Ibid., p. 337.

horse stood still'[79]; 'Music falls on the silence like a sense'[80]; 'In solitude the trumpets of solitude/ Are not of another solitude resounding'[81]; 'A little string speaks for a crowd of voices'[82]; 'Sighing that he should leave the banjo's twang'[83]; 'idiot minstrelsy in rain' – 'Bethou, bethou, bethou me' – 'It is/ A sound like any other'[84]; 'We have not the need of any seducing hymn'[85]; 'Like a page of music' - 'The west wind was the music, the motion'.[86] The sounding of these musical 'Notes' evokes the sense of 'change' that Stevens' demands ('Must Change'), but it is also the means of 'playing' the audience into that nature of 'change'.

The playing of music is the conscious effort to play multiple beings into a single sense of *being*. Stevens had said of poem XI of 'Blue Guitar' that: 'The chord destroys its elements by uniting them in the chord. They then cease to exist separately.'[87] This theme would be posited as a 'unifying' force capable of eradicating racism in the very late poem, 'The Sick Man'. Here the 'Bands' of 'black men' 'seem to be drifting in the air', 'Playing mouth-organs in the night or, now, guitars.'[88] The music has the effect of awakening 'the sick man' lying in bed to an ontological connection with the 'black men'. This echoes the kind of range of musical expression sought for in Hölderlin's *Hyperion* at climactic moments: 'all that has being floated together in blissful union, like a chorus of a thousand inseparable

[79] Ibid., p. 338.
[80] Ibid., p. 339.
[81] Ibid., p. 339.
[82] Ibid., p. 339.
[83] Ibid., p. 340.
[84] Ibid., pp. 340 - 341.
[85] Ibid., p. 341.
[86] Ibid., p. 343.
[87] A Letter to Hi Simons, August 10th, 1940. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 363.
[88] Wallace Stevens, 'The Sick Man', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 455.

tones'.[89] We will investigate the romantic origin of such a conception in relation to pre-Socratism in due course.

The seemingly impossible feat of sounding 'A million people on one string' was achieved in 'Blue Guitar' by playing the chords of that instrument. In 'It Must Change', Stevens recalls this precise moment with: 'A little string speaks for a crowd of voices'.[90] The single string plays the audience into a state of oneness. Stevens suggested in a letter of 1940 that:

> One thing about life is that the mind of one man, if strong enough, can become the master of all the life in the world…Any really great poet, musician, etc. does this.[91]

It is the 'poet' and 'musician' who can 'become the master of all the life in the world'. Stevens' musician is a 'metaphysician in the dark' who 'plays' through a poetry of connection that includes the audience.

Gadamer suggests that 'we make every work of art, as it were, into a picture.'[92] In investigating the mode of *being* of a picture, Gadamer considers that 'Every picture is an increase of being and is essentially definable as representation, as coming-to-presentation.'[93] Stevens paints his own pictures in poetry, not least through a systematised use of colour, with blue symbolising the imagination, red reality, green nature, and debatably, purple symbolising complete *being*, mixing the subjective blue with the objective red. What we do know is that when Stevens read from the 'purple tabulae', it produced: 'The outlines of being and its expressings'.[94]

Stevens' engagement with painting through poetry is clear to see. On occasion he will write a poem inspired by a painting, as in the case of 'Angel

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[89] Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hyperion and Selected Poems*, ed. by Eric L Santner (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1990), p. 60.
[90] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 339.
[91] A Letter to Hi Simons, August 8th, 1940. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 360.
[92] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 131.
[93] Ibid., p. 142.
[94] Wallace Stevens, 'Large Red Man Reading', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 365.

Surrounded by Paysans'. This poem, collected in *The Auroras of Autumn*, celebrates what Bonnie Costello has called 'the presence/absence dynamic' of a Pierre Tal-Coat painting that Stevens had acquired.[95] In earlier examples, Stevens would present poems in a sequence of vivid pictures, such as the stark black and white of the distinctly Oriental picture-poem from *Harmonium* (1923), 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird'. At times Stevens will refer to artists directly, such as Pablo Picasso or Frans Hals, adopting their styles in his verse. On yet more occasions he will compose poetry by looking at the world much as the artist does, arranging forms upon a canvas to create the desired effect. For example when he recalls having 'recomposed the pines' and having 'Shifted the rocks', 'For the outlook that would be right', in 'The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain', published in his 1954 *Collected Poems* as one of the poems of *The Rock*.[96] As an artist, Stevens is always projecting and it is through the 'play' of his projection of the picture in the process of *being formed*, that for Gadamer he plays his audience into an ontological 'understanding' of the weave and fibres of that one canvas.

Stevens appreciated a wide variety of artists. Costello relates that:

> He liked the classicism of Claude Lorrain, the silvery atmosphere of Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, the struggle for realization in Paul Cézanne, the decreative energy of Pablo Picasso, the comic-tragic disposition of Paul Klee, the virility of Pierre Tal-Coat. Critics have found links between Stevens' poetry and artistic movements such as impressionism, symbolism, Cubism, and even surrealism and abstract expressionism. But as Stevens writes: "The subject of modern relations [between poetry and painting] is best to be approached as a whole".[97]

This approach of taking the modern relations between poetry and painting 'as a whole' suggests that Stevens identifies his own poetic effort of realisation with that

[95] Bonnie Costello, 'Stevens and Painting', *The Cambridge Companion To Wallace Stevens*, p. 178.
[96] Wallace Stevens, 'The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 435.
[97] Bonnie Costello, 'Stevens and Painting', *The Cambridge Companion To Wallace Stevens*, pp. 164 - 165.

of the painter, which itself suggests that *poesis*, or the act of making, is a reductive concept for Stevens. 'It Must Be Abstract' of 'Notes' shows that 'Abstraction' is Stevens' method of 'play' here. Not surprisingly, in one of the poems we find an example of an artist in the act of making brush strokes:

> Not to be realized because not to
> Be seen, not to be loved nor hated because
> Not to be realized. Weather by Franz Hals,
>
> Brushed up by brushy winds in brushy clouds,
> Wetted by blue, colder for white.[98]

The paint is connecting with the elements of water and air and evoking something 'not to/ Be seen', something like Stevens' 'foreign song' from 'Of Mere Being'.[99] In this poem from 'It Must Be Abstract', Stevens provides a description of what his painting in poetry is drawing his audience into a relationship with:

> It must be visible or invisible,
> Invisible or visible or both:
> A seeing and unseeing in the eye.
>
> The weather and the giant of the weather,
> Say the weather, the mere weather, the mere air:
> An abstraction blooded, as a man by thought.[100]

The 'visible' and the 'invisible' are blended in painting and poetry, as in sight and thought. The act of painting on a canvas is to take something from the 'invisible' whole and abstract it in colour. That the appearing of the physical paint is termed as 'An abstraction blooded, as a man by thought', demonstrates Stevens' effort to show that mental representations and physical representations are connected in the 'invisible' whole. The *act* of painting or making poetry involves us all in this 'oneness', by *enacting* the 'truth' of an appearing out of the 'invisible' to which we

[98] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 333.
[99] Wallace Stevens, 'Of Mere Being', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 476 - 477.
[100] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 333.

are purported to be connected. The canvas, the blank page and the mind become horizons for the revealing of *being*. Of Caravaggio's *The Death of the Virgin*, 1605 - 6, the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy suggests that:

We are there without leaving the threshold, on the threshold, neither inside nor outside – and perhaps we are, ourselves, the threshold, just as our eye conforms to the plane of the canvas and weaves itself into its fabric.[101]

Gadamer's radicalisation of the hermeneutical project considers that '*language is the universal realm in which understanding occurs*', and that:

We can now see that this activity of the thing itself, the coming into language of meaning, points to a universal ontological structure, namely to the basic nature of everything toward which understanding can be directed. *Being that can be understood is language*.[102]

As poet, Stevens' primary mode of 'play' is language. For example, in poem XXIV of 'The Man With The Blue Guitar' (1937) Stevens writes:

A poem like a missal found
In the mud, a missal for that young man,

That scholar hungriest for that book,
The very book, or, less, a page

Or, at the least, a phrase, that phrase,
A hawk of life, that latined phrase:

To know; a missal for brooding-sight.
To meet that hawk's eye and to flinch

Not at the eye but at the joy of it.
I play. But this is what I think.[103]

'I play. But this is what I think.' The 'play', performed through language with reference to the 'guitar', is linked to the serious thought that poetry can replace the

[101] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 57.
[102] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 469 - 470.
[103] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 145 - 146.

religious text, relishing nature instead. There can be little doubt that Stevens' language is self-consciously at 'play'. From *Harmonium* it cries, it calls, it sings and it addresses:

> Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan
> Of tan with henna hackles, halt![104]

Stevens' 'play' is universal in scope and it is through the ontological connection that he feels the poet or musician is able to 'become the master of all the life in the world', as here in poem XXV of 'Blue Guitar':

> He held the world upon his nose
> And this-a-way he gave a fling.
>
> His robes and symbols, ai-yi-yi—
> And that-a-way he twirled the thing.[105]

At times the language can be more direct in trying to touch the senses through terms such as: 'flick'[106], 'clipped'[107], 'nick'[108] and 'rattapallax'.[109] At other times this effort to connect can become violent. It wants to 'burn', to 'trace' and press its 'character' onto us. Poem III of 'Blue Guitar' says:

> To drive a dagger in his heart,
>
> To lay his brain upon the board
> And pick the acrid colors out,
>
> To nail his thought across the door,
> Its wings spread wide to rain and snow,
>
> To strike his living hi and ho,
> To tick it, tock it, turn it true,

[104] Wallace Stevens, 'Bantams in Pine-Woods', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 60.
[105] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 146.
[106] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 333.
[107] Wallace Stevens, 'The Comedian as the Letter C', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 37.
[108] Wallace Stevens, 'The Auroras of Autumn', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 363.
[109] Wallace Stevens, 'Frogs Eat Butterflies. Snakes Eat Frogs. Hogs Eat Snakes. Men Eat Hogs', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 62.

To bang it from a savage blue,
Jangling the metal of the strings...[110]

The imagination is violently forged together with a reality that includes nature *and* the metal, mechanical world of modernity. It wants to 'drive', 'lay', 'pick', 'nail', 'spread', 'tick' and 'bang' it into a single 'reality'. Mind and world are nailed together and it is the 'play' of the language that grounds the work of art and us in an ontological connection for Gadamer.

Equally, Stevens' language can be classical, delighting in a knowing pomposity: 'Begin, ephebe'[111], 'Ecce, Oxidia'[112], 'celestial ennui of apartments'[113], 'lutanist of fleas'[114], 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle'[115]. Yet the last thing it desires is language for its own sake. What it desires is 'reality', the reality of a 'Pure rhetoric of a language without words', the unveiling of *being* in language as 'a shape of life described/ By another shape without a word'.[116] It is desperate to include what cannot be said into what can be said, to 'say the unsayable', as that which connects all things.[117] Rational language must make way for a revealing of reality: 'there are words/ Better without an author, without a poet'.[118] It echoes Gadamer's suggestion that '*being that can be understood is language.*'[119]

[110] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 135 - 136.
[111] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 329.
[112] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 149.
[113] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p.330.
[114] Wallace Stevens, 'The Comedian as the Letter C', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 22.
[115] Wallace Stevens, 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 10.
[116] Wallace Stevens, 'Credences of Summer' & 'Banjo Boomer', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 324 & 475.
[117] Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory – The Philosophy of German Literary Theory*, pp. 22 - 23.
[118] Wallace Stevens, 'The Creations of Sound', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 274.
[119] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 470.

Stevens will 'play' with different languages, seamlessly slipping into French and German: '*C'était mon enfant, mon bijou, mon âme*', or 'Ach, Mutter'.[120] The effect of the 'play' is one of connecting the audience to the 'whole', which is the thrust of Stevens' poetic project. Stevens had written in his *Adagia* that: 'French and English constitute a single language'.[121] This could also be viewed as an example of the notion that modernism is international, though this would apply more to Stevens' language and interest, rather than to his non-existent travel to other continents.

A poignant example of what Gadamer calls the 'play' of a work of art, of language reflecting a universal hermeneutic experience, is given in 'It Must Be Abstract' from 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction'. Here Stevens begins by giving the theory:

> The poem refreshes life so that we share,
> For a moment, the first idea . . . It satisfies
> Belief in an immaculate beginning
>
> And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,
> To an immaculate end. We move between these points:
> From that ever-early candor to its late plural
>
> And the candor of them is the strong exhilaration
> Of what we feel from what we think, of thought
> Beating in the heart, as if blood newly came,
>
> An elixir, an excitation, a pure power.
> The poem, through candor, brings back a power again
> That gives a candid kind to everything. [122]

The poem, as a new creation, 'refreshes life' and curiously brings poet and audience into a state where they 'share' the 'first idea'. We will outline Stevens' interpretation of the 'first idea' in due course. For now it is enough to see how this refreshing of life 'Satisfies belief in an immaculate beginning' from which all subsequent

[120] Wallace Stevens, 'Sea Surface Full of Clouds' & 'Explanation', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 83 & 58.
[121] Wallace Stevens, 'Adagia', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 914.
[122] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 330 - 331.

pluralities are intimated to arise. Stevens says that it is through the 'ever-early' 'candor', the openness of the poem, that this 'pure power' is to be found. In origin, 'candor' is a pure radiance or 'whiteness'.[123] I will argue that the fundamental ground that opens up for Stevens through the 'candor' of the poem, is one in which he can attempt to recreate (abstract) a broader sense of what it means to be human. The poem, as a new creation, creates this 'power' by bathing everything in the original unity of the 'first idea'; it 'gives a candid kind to everything'. Poetry refreshes life in its 'pure radiance', in what Gadamer, after Heidegger, calls its *being*, which is 'ever-early'. The experience of the appearing of a new fiction, to use Stevens' language from a late poem entitled 'The Rock', produces 'The body quickened and the mind in root.'[124] From this universal re-grounding of reality in the equality of mere *being* the poet is free to abstract whatever he wants. Stevens continues in 'Notes' by presenting a proof for his theory:

> We say: At night an Arabian in my room,
> With his damned hoobla-hoobla-hobbla-how,
> Inscribes a primitive astronomy
>
> Across the unscrawled fores the future casts
> And throws his stars around the floor. By day
> The wood-dove used to chant his hoobla-hoo
>
> And still the grossest iridescence of ocean
> Howls hoo and rises and howls hoo and falls.
> Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation.[125]

This mini-poem is an example of how poetry generates 'candor', through 'play', that draws the audience into a single ground opened by its 'hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how'. In itself, in terms of rational 'meaning', it is only part of 'Life's nonsense', yet the 'play' of it 'pierces us' with the single bond of 'strange relation'. Here, form

[123] Judy Pearsall, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 203.
[124] Wallace Stevens, 'The Rock', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 446.
[125] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 331.

dominates meaning. It raises the 'first idea' by showing a new appearance, reminding the audience that everything is grounded in the 'first idea', and embracing them in that fundamental ground. Gadamer suggests that the 'play' of a work of art draws the audience into an ontological experience. Stevens had said that he liked his philosophy 'smothered in beauty and not the other way around'.[126] The nature of this outer beauty, what Stevens called the 'essential gaudiness' of poetry, is itself 'philosophical' to Gadamer.[127]

In terms of the philosophy that lies beneath this outer shell of beauty, Gadamer suggests the following of his own connections of language, object and thought:

> But must we not speak of the rightness of words – i.e., insist on the unity of word and thing? Did not the most profound of early thinkers, Heraclitus, discover the depth of meaning contained in the play on words?[128]

Further that:

> In considering the being of beings, Greek metaphysics regarded it as a being that fulfilled itself in thought. This thought is the thought of nous, which is conceived as the highest and most perfect being, gathering within itself the being of all beings. The articulation of the logos brings the structure of being into language, and this coming into language is, for Greek thought, nothing other than the presencing of the being itself, its aletheia.[129]

The Greek conception of the 'being of beings', and what Gadamer refers to as 'the Eliatic principle of the association of being and noein' [mind/thought], belong to Parmenides.[130] Indeed, Gadamer says that: 'In that our hermeneutical theory seeks to show the interconnection of event and understanding, it sends us back to

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[126] Milton J. Bates, "Stevens' Books at the Huntington: An Annotated Checklist," *Wallace Stevens Journal* 2.3/4 (1978), p. 50.
[127] A Letter to William Rose Benét, January 6th, 1933. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 263.
[128] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 406.
[129] Ibid., p. 453.
[130] Ibid., p. 443.

Parmenides'.[131] Gadamer's reliance on Parmenides comes with the following proviso:

> We are simply following an internal necessity of the thing itself if we go beyond the idea of the object and the objectivity of understanding toward the idea that subject and object belong together...But we cannot simply follow the Greeks.[132]

Rather, Gadamer says that he was drawn 'toward the dialectic of the Greeks, because they did not conceive understanding as a methodic activity of the subject, but as something that the thing itself does and which thought suffers.'[133] This recalls Stevens' statement pertaining to 'An abstraction blooded, as a man by thought.'[134] I would suggest that this is Parmenidean 'thought' in origin, but a proof of that is not essential for the case ahead.

Gadamer's return to the rhythms of the two pre-Socratics, Heraclitus and Parmenides, will now lead us through a chronological reading of each of Stevens' collections. Here we will analyse how the language and form of Stevens' poetry evokes what McMahon calls an '*archai* of unity', to see if this accounts for the 'philosophy' that Stevens has smothered with 'beauty', and also to consider whether it bears resemblance to Gadamer's own reliance upon pre-Socratism.[135] If so, this would have significant implications for critics' constant reading of a Heideggerian philosophy into Stevens' poetry, as Heidegger's own philosophy owes much to pre-Socratic thought. What Gadamer's ontological sense of 'play' has demonstrated to this point, is the hermeneutic relationship of Stevens' poetry and its reading

[131] Ibid., p. 456.
[132] Ibid., p. 457.
[133] Ibid., p. 469.
[134] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 333.
[135] Willam E. McMahon, *The Higher Humanism of Wallace Stevens – Studies in American Literature Volume Twelve*, p. 158.

audience. We will now turn our attention to the ground with which Stevens appears to be connecting his audience.

After Kant: Experiencing the 'Thing-In-Itself' through the Pre-Socratic Element in the Philosophy of Art

Harmonium – A Poetry of Connection

Critchley seems entirely correct to suggest that Stevens comes at poetry from a 'perceived failure of Kantianism, from what might be called a *dejected transcendental idealism*'.[136] Similarly, Bloom appears accurate in suggesting that Stevens began as an 'involuntary and desperate Transcendentalist.'[137] However, in what follows I will argue that Stevens' poetry is in line with post-Kantian poets and philosophers of art, who, in certain instances, turned back to pre-Socratic thought in an effort to overcome Kant and reconnect with the 'thing-in-itself'.

Having seen the pre-Socratic thought at the heart of Gadamer's sense of how an audience 'understands' a work of art, we can now analyse the chronological development of Stevens' *use* of language and form as it attempts to enact a sense of these ontological concepts. It is because art, mind and world are equally founded in *being* and *becoming* for Stevens, that these conceptions become the means of reconnecting with the 'thing-in-itself'. This reconnection necessarily takes place in art for Stevens, because art refreshes the ontological connection and shows mind and world, or the imagination and reality, to be 'one'. The result is to ascribe a truth-telling function to the work of art, which is itself subject to *being* and *becoming*. My contention is that such an effort to reconnect with the 'thing-in-itself' through art is

[136] Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are – Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (London & New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 25.
[137] Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, p. 25.

reminiscent of the objectives of pre-Socratic poetic ontology, and that it is the artistic act of opening a new *poesis* that is perceived as forming the point of connection.

Critchley argues that Stevens owes his sense 'that "the two-in-oneness" of the world is phenomenologically disclosed or reflectively transfigured as a world *not* in philosophy but through a poetic act, that is to say, in an artwork', to 'romanticism'.[138] Stevens' initial debt to romanticism in this specific regard seems highly likely. However, later poems will show that reductive pre-Socratic concepts, themselves originally expressed in poetry, closely parallel how Stevens progressed beyond romanticism. We may also say that it was the pre-Socratics to whom a romantic poet such as Hölderlin turned back, precisely in order to justify reducing two things to one thing. Stevens' letters suggest that he was familiar with Hölderlin, who wrote several pieces in homage to Empedocles, admiring his ability to 'confuse the subjective and objective in their appearance'.[139] What is significant is that Empedocles wrote his philosophy of connection in poetic form.

If the question of art becomes the question of philosophy at the writing of the third *Critique*, as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy suggest, then we may consider that without Kant we would not have had romanticism.[140] This is not to say that romanticism is merely a 'scheme derived from post-Kantian philosophy'.[141] Rather, Kant becomes instrumental for creating the ground for a movement that modernism has perhaps not so much escaped, as rehashed.[142] In other words, part of the unconscious movement evident within modernism, to Lacoue-

[138] Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are – Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, p. 30.
[139] Friedrich Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, trans. and ed. by Thomas Pfau (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 61.
[140] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, trans. by Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 30.
[141] Ibid., p. 11.
[142] Ibid., p. 15.

Labarthe and Nancy, is its various uses of romanticism as a ‘foil’ to modernism while not considering how it is reworking romanticism.[143] This does not lead them to attempt to establish the ‘contemporary relevance of romanticism’, as a ‘suppression pure and simple of history’, but rather they consider that we still belong to the age it opened up.[144]

If it is true to suggest that ‘Philosophy, then, controls romanticism’, or in less provocative terms, ‘Kant opens up the possibility of romanticism’, then perhaps it is not surprising that elements of this post-Kantian poetry should consume pre-Socratic poetic thought for its ability to collapse the subjective and objective divide.[145] What certain post-Kantian philosophers and poets seem to have wanted from pre-Socratic poetic ontology, is its claim to reconnect with the 'thing-in-itself'. As we shall see later, one of the interesting developments with modernism is how not just the audience, but also the poet and poetry itself stand in relation to these reductive pre-Socratic concerns.

Heraclitean Reverberations

Arguably, Stevens' earliest poems did not immediately approach an evocation of the ontological centre at the heart of their 'play'. Rather, they found their way to a breakthrough into a sense of 'pure *being*' (that I will argue was attempted fully in 'The Snow Man') by viewing an individual poem to be a 'thing-in-itself'. For example, Stevens said of 'The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician', first published in 1919 and collected in *Harmonium*, that it was written ‘at a time when I

[143] Ibid., p. 15.
[144] Ibid., p. 15.
[145] Ibid., p. 29.

felt strongly that poems were things in themselves'.[146] Though Critchley considers that Stevens is interested in the thing itself, this considerably weakens his claim for Stevens that 'the poet gives us ideas about the thing, not the thing itself.'[147]

That poems were 'things in themselves' for Stevens, at the time when he was composing the pieces for *Harmonium*, can be read as a parallel with the poetic philosophy of the pre-Socratics. Müller had suggested that 'the philosophers of old' preferred a language of *phusei* over a language of *thesei*, thus creating their own natural/physical language.[148] This could be seen as a parallel of Stevens' 'Earthy Anecdote', the poem that opens *Harmonium*. John Miles, following Joan Richardson in highlighting the importance of the pre-Socratics for Stevens, suggests that 'Earthy Anecdote' 'is a poem with which the Presocratics might feel at home.'[149] As Eleanor Cook has noted, in its original Greek form the word 'anecdote' (*anékdota*) means 'a secret or private, hitherto unpublished narrative'.[150] The language of Stevens' poem is itself presented as part of the earth, an 'unpublished' language of *phusei*. Müller records that Heraclitus 'was reported to have said, that to use any words except those supplied by nature for each thing, was not to speak, but only to make a noise.'[151] Bart Eeckhout maintains that Stevens would have realized the similarities between his own world view and that of Heraclitus.[152] Such modes of thought lend a palpable sense to language, placing it on equal terms with natural reality, such as in the *Harmonium* poem, 'To the Roaring Wind':

What syllable are you seeking,

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[146] A Letter to Hi Simmons, April 18th, 1944. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 463.
[147] Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are – Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, p. 6.
[148] Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language*, pp. 332 - 333.
[149] John Miles, 'An Encounter with the Firecat: Wallace Stevens' "Earthy Anecdote"', *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, Vol. 22 No. 2 (Fall 1998), pp. 116 – 132.
[150] Eleanor Cook, *A Reader's Guide to Wallace Stevens*, p. 30.
[151] Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language*, p. 334.
[152] Bart Eeckhout, 'Stevens and Philosophy', *The Cambridge Companion To Wallace Stevens*, p. 107.

Vocalissimus,
In the distances of sleep?
Speak it.[153]

Certainly the idea of poetry being a 'thing-in-itself' remained in Stevens and is still evident in the long poem, ‘An Ordinary Evening in New Haven’, collected in *The Auroras of Autumn*:

The poem is the cry of its occasion,
Part of the res itself and not about it.
The poet speaks the poem as it is,

Not as it was: part of the reverberation
Of a windy night as it is[154]

Poetry is not ‘about’ things, it is part of ‘the res’, part of the ‘thing-in-itself’, because poetry and reality both share in Stevens’ repetition of the mere ‘it is’. The above lines from ‘An Ordinary Evening’ are an example of the aforementioned significant development of individual poems as ‘things in themselves’, as seen in *Harmonium*, to the point where poems are considered by Stevens to be part of a universal ‘res itself’, which is the ‘rock’.

Stevens’ poems as ‘things in themselves’ in *Harmonium*, can be presented as reduced to a fundamental *becoming* to which everything is subject. For example, in the Heraclitean sounding 'Life is Motion', ‘Bonnie and Josie’ dance around a stump and cry out in celebration of the ‘marriage/ Of flesh and air’.[155] The model parallels a fragment of Heraclitus who had said that:

Couples are things whole and things not whole, what is drawn together and what is drawn asunder, the harmonious and the discordant. The one is made up of all things, and all things issue from the one.[156]

[153] Wallace Stevens, ‘To the Roaring Wind’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 77.
[154] Wallace Stevens, ‘An Ordinary Evening in New Haven’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 404.
[155] Wallace Stevens, ‘Life is Motion’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 65.
[156] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 137.

‘Bonnie and Josie’ can be read as objects in flux, moving around the centre as a model for ‘the harmonious’, to which the poem itself as an object is also attuned. As such, *becoming* is both a mode of ‘play’ in Stevens and a ground into which he plays us.

Heraclitus’ universal philosophy of ‘the harmonious’, presents a parallel for what Stevens seems to imply in naming his first collection *Harmonium*. What Stevens *may* have done is to combine the sense of a fundamental *harmoniē* of ontological connection with a specifically American musical art, the humble native instrument of that name. Art becomes the means of expression for a reductive philosophy, as Stevens ‘plays’ his audience into the single ground of *becoming*. However there are a number of philosophical sources from which Stevens could have derived the title of this collection. For example, the post-Kantian Schelling speaks of ‘The ultimate ground of all harmony between subjective and objective’, rendered ‘by means of the work of art’.[157] What seems more definitive is that Schelling, and other post-Kantian philosophers of art, found in the philosophy ‘born and nourished by poetry in the infancy of knowledge’, a sense ‘that art is the only true and eternal organ and document of philosophy’.[158] Regardless of a definitive source for the title of Stevens’ first collection, it certainly presents its own ‘art’ as something similar to an ‘eternal organ’ (harmonium) grounded in a fundamental philosophy that I would argue is ‘nourished’ by Pre-Socratic concerns.

The language and form of Stevens' poetry is a means by which he evokes the harmony of fundamental *becoming*, to which reality and the poem are equally bound.

[157] F.W.J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. by Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), p. 232.
[158] Ibid., p. 232.

'The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician', written in the belief that 'poems were things in themselves', evokes a sense of universal *becoming*:

> It comes about that the drifting of these curtains
> Is full of long motions; as the ponderous
> Deflations of distance; or as clouds
> Inseparable from their afternoons[159]

The sense of a reduction to *becoming* is enhanced by the language and form of the poem as it unfolds, by using words that sound the same (either through a direct rhyme or the use of assonance) and creating a single extended sound in the sustained alliteration of 'curtains', 'deflations' and 'motions'. The individual words are collapsed into the oneness of the same sound. It is this alliterative sense of oneness in the endings of the words that makes the sentence itself sound 'long', 'ponderous' and, combined with the rhythm, even 'Inseparable'. This is reminiscent of what 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird' will call 'the inescapable rhythms', which is how the binding oneness of the 'reduction of metaphysics' is aurally achieved.[160]

Through the form of the poem the curtains drift up in 'long motions' until they hit the semi-colon, resulting in a 'ponderous' moment, from which they appear to deflate into the next line. The opening phrase of the poem, 'It comes about', implies that *becoming* is *beyond* rational perception, beyond the subjective self as a fundamental cause to which the poem is itself connected. 'It comes about' is a statement of *becoming* to which all things (including the poem) are subject, and that is precisely how the poem unfolds. The curtains drift as clouds drift, linking them to the natural objects of clouds, which are 'Inseparable from their afternoons'.

[159] Wallace Stevens, 'The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 49.
[160] Wallace Stevens, 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 75.

Language, the curtains, the days and the clouds are all linked in the oneness of *becoming*, the universal harmony.

If we search for a parallel for Stevens' sense of universal *becoming*, then the Heraclitean *archê* ('first beginning') of flux presents itself. However, for Heraclitus, flux was itself driven by a fundamental 'fire'. He had written that:

This world, which is the same for all, no one of gods or men has made; but it was ever, is now, and ever shall be an ever-living Fire, with measures of it kindling, and measures going out.[161]

In Stevens' 'Earthy Anecdote', 'Every time' the 'firecat' bristles in the way, the 'bucks' *move* in a 'swift circular line' to the 'right' and 'left'. [162] The sense of movement is enhanced by the undulating syllables of 'Over Oklahoma' and the 'firecat' that 'bristled', goes 'leaping', as flames leap.[163] Miles has said that there is no such animal as a 'firecat', which we might suggest portends its metaphysical nature as a metaphysical fire.[164] This firecat could be a model for Zarathustra's 'fire dog' as B.J. Leggett suggests, but the universality of its 'law' seems to suggest a more fundamental *archê*, to which the 'measures' of the poem are also bound, in a mode reminiscent of the pre-Socratics.[165] Hillis Miller's reading certainly seems to sense something closer to the Heraclitean reduction: 'Earth and mind are reduced to these elements, and motion on one side is possible only so long as there is life on the other.'[166]

The concept of a universal *becoming* founded in a fundamental fire is equally evident in 'Domination of Black':

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[161] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 134.
[162] Wallace Stevens, 'Earthy Anecdote', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 3.
[163] Ibid., p. 3.
[164] John Miles, 'An Encounter with the Firecat: Wallace Stevens' "Earthy Anecdote"', *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, Vol. 22 No. 2 (Fall 1998), pp. 116 – 132.
[165] B.J. Leggett, *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), pp. 210 - 212.
[166] J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality*, p. 235.

Turning in the wind,
Turning as the flames
Turned in the fire[167]

This nature of perpetual 'Turning' is extended to the cosmos, showing that everything, be it a leaf or a planet is subject to this 'law' for Stevens, as the terms are again universalized:

Out of the window,
I saw how the planets gathered
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind. [168]

The 'planets' are 'gathered' and are 'Like' 'leaves', bound to the single 'law' of motion. Hillis Miller has considered of the poem that: 'it is like the universe of Heraclitus.'[169] This is true, but importantly, it is like the universe of Heraclitus realized through a poetic act. Stevens' poetic acts appear to remember Heraclitus' poetic use of *harmoniē*, the image of the bow and the lyre and the 'measures' of fiery flux. Through musical 'play' both poetry and reality, as 'things in themselves', are reduced to the universal 'truth' of *becoming*. This raises the possibility that it is in Heraclitus' 'play on words', that insists upon 'the unity of word and thing', that Stevens and Gadamer meet in their dealings with art and ontology.[170]

Critchley suggests that there is a move in Stevens that may be compared to the move from '*metaphysica specialis*, special metaphysics concerned with God, freedom and immortality, to *metaphysica generalis*, or the general metaphysics of Kant's transcendental idealism'.[171] Critchley's argument suggests that if Kant decisively shows that 'the issues of the nature of God and soul are simply beyond

[167] Wallace Stevens, 'Domination of Black', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 7.
[168] Ibid., p. 7.
[169] J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality*, p. 227.
[170] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 406.
[171] Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are – Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, p. 36.

our ken and are thus cognitively meaningless', then that does not exclude the possibility of a philosophy that may be able to investigate what we do know.[172] This, Critchley says, is the 'transcendental turn in philosophy' which means that the question of 'the relation of thought to things or mind to world can no longer be conceived in terms of some myth of the given, whether material or immaterial substance, but rather has to be conceived as radically subject dependent, i.e. that which *is* is only for the subject to whom it appears, even if what appears is real for us.'[173]

Certainly we can agree with Critchley in saying that Stevens presents a departure from 'some myth of the given', as the elemental *becoming* of 'Ploughing on Sunday' is presumably embraced in favour of the church-tolling bell.[174] However, I would argue that Stevens' move is from something that looks like *metaphysica specialis* to a 'reduction of metaphysics' that collapses transcendental idealism, much as Heidegger had in his critique of Kant.[175] For this thought, rather than 'what is' being 'only for the subject for whom it appears', the poet arguably uses poetic language to establish 'the connection between subject and object', as Hölderlin says, in order to know the 'thing-in-itself'.[176] As we proceed I will argue that this connection for Stevens (as for Heidegger), has a close affinity with the poetic ontology of the pre-Socratics.

[172] Ibid., pp. 36 - 37.
[173] Ibid., p. 37.
[174] Wallace Stevens, 'Ploughing on Sunday', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 16.
[175] See Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927) and *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (1929)
[176] Friedrich Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, p. 37.

Parmenidean Visions

The sense of a universal 'law' of *becoming* never departed from Stevens' poetry. For Heraclitus, as we have outlined, we may say that the *archê* ('first beginnings') of the universe was fire and *becoming*. However, for Parmenides, the founder of what has come to be called ontology, the *archê* of the universe was the 'it is', *being*.[177] This *archê* stands in contrast to Heraclitus' conception of *becoming* in that *being* is seemingly static, a paradox which Stevens' verse exploits. Stevens explained his own conception of the 'first idea' in a letter to Henry Church in 1942, as follows:

> Someone here wrote to me and wanted to know what I meant by a thinker of the first idea. If you take the varnish and dirt of generations off a picture, you see it in its first idea. If you think about the world without its varnish and dirt, you are a thinker of the first idea.[178]

Harold Bloom, after considering the quote from Stevens' letter above, suggests that: 'The only relevant philosophical notion would seem to be C. S. Peirce's Idea of Firstness. In a letter of 1944, Stevens said he long had been curious about Peirce but implied that other interests had kept him from reading the philosopher.'[179]

From Stevens' explanation of the 'first idea' and his use of the term within his poetry, I would interpret it as a concept akin to the pre-Socratic sense of *being* as an *archê* ('first beginnings') that underlies all reality. Stevens' explanation starts by describing a way of *seeing* the world. I interpret this as meaning that the 'first idea' always originates in the world, rather than as a rational thought within our own minds. This would interpret 'idea' as an *eidos*, a direct sense image which has to be *seen*. The 'first idea' is buried beneath the 'varnish and dirt', which I interpret to be

[177] Julian Marias, *History of Philosophy*, pp. 21 - 22.
[178] A Letter to Henry Church, October 28th, 1942. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, pp. 426 - 427.
[179] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 49.

all of the names and rational ideas that humanity has *attributed* to the world through the mind. In opposition to this, Stevens seems to be advocating that there is an 'idea' that is not our own in origin, and that both mind and world arise from 'it'.

The difficulty with Stevens' statement is that he proceeds to talk about a 'thinker' of the 'first idea', which appears to imply a rational thought. However, it is not a rational thought that begins in the mind, rather it is the opposite. The *seeing* of the 'first idea' in the world has to take place first. To think the 'first idea' is to think the 'nothing' of *being* from which mind, all thoughts and the world itself arise in the equality of mere *being* as the 'it is'. When you think about the 'first idea', you are allowing your own mind to be utterly reduced in the thought of mere *being*, which is always 'first' in terms of priority, and no matter how many millions of thoughts and things proceed from 'it', 'it' always remains 'first' as the *archê, being*. To be a 'thinker of the first idea' is to reduce thought to *being* so that mind is what *being* unveils, not the other way around, as we shall see.

However, the particular object which Stevens uses as an example for how to see the 'first idea' is a picture, a work of art. According to Stevens one must look for the 'first idea' in the 'world' as one would look for it in a 'picture', demonstrating that for Stevens both art and world (which includes the mind) are equally grounded in the single 'first idea'. 'Angel Surrounded by Paysans', a poem about a painting, collected in *The Auroras of Autumn*, suggests that 'in my sight, you see the earth again'.[180] The role of the poet is to reveal the single ground that underlies art, mind and world (without the 'varnish and dirt'), thus applying a truth-telling function to poetry. Such poetry does not view *itself* as a work of art, rather it is a mode of

[180] Wallace Stevens, 'Angel Surrounded by Paysans', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 423.

unveiling a connection between art, mind and the world, and as such it claims to be the ground of an enlarged reality of 'truth'.

A new work of art provides a connection to the 'first idea' because it is the appearing of something new, in the 'candor' of its *being*, giving 'a candid kind to everything' that sends us back to an 'immaculate beginning', which sounds very much like the *archê* ('first beginnings') that a pre-Socratic like Parmenides attempted to 'reach' through a poetic act.[181] In 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' Stevens says that 'The first idea was not our own', 'Adam/ In Eden was the father of Descartes.'[182] It was not 'our own' because it doesn't come from the human mind, but is what mind and world are proposed to arise from. The inference suggests that in naming the animals Adam covered the 'first idea' of the thing itself (thus making it 'our own') with a web of language and meaning. It is from this nexus that the poet must extricate all things and allow them to be seen in the unity of the 'first idea' of mere *being*, that lies beneath the 'varnish and dirt'.[183]

It is from the thing itself that Stevens is suggesting we should allow the original 'idea' of *being* to step forth, as a reversal of the rationalist terms, just as Parmenides' *poesis* had done through the concept of *aletheia* ('unveiling'). For Gadamer this was something that 'thought suffers' from 'the thing itself'[184], just as for Stevens it was like 'An abstraction blooded, as a man by thought.'[185] The terms of the Kantian mind that orders the world are collapsed as mind and world are connected in the 'first idea', opened by the 'candor' of the poem appearing out of

[181] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 330 - 331.
[182] Ibid., p. 331.
[183] Wallace Stevens, 'Of Mere Being', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 476.
[184] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 469.
[185] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 333.

being. Stevens' perspective of the underlying 'first idea' of the 'it is' is aligned with Parmenides' sense that:

> Wherefore all these things are but names which mortals have given, believing them to be true—coming into being and passing away, being and not being, change of place and alteration of bright colour.[186]

For this thinking it is folly to name objects as individually distinct from the totality of *being*, which is the 'first idea' that underlies all things. Stevens would record in his *Adagia* the concept of: 'The World Reduced to One Thing.'[187] Rajeev Patke has surmised that the 'first idea' in Stevens is 'probably Atomic or Parmenidean in origin. Whatever its ancestry, Stevens's fascination with it is obvious.'[188]

In very early poems such as 'In The Carolinas', first published in the January 1917 issue of *The Soil: A Magazine of Art*, as part of a group of poems collectively titled *Primordia*, Stevens can be seen mining his earthy language *itself* for the 'honey' of a universal ground of unity. In his collected essays entitled *The Necessary Angel* (1951), Stevens says that: 'Poetry is a revelation in words by means of words.'[189] Stevens, like Heidegger, appears to consider that 'language is an object' to be mined for the universal ground in which all nature stands connected in *being*.[190] 'In the Carolinas' presents all things as subject to an *archê* that incorporates the 'aspic nipples' of nature that vent honey.[191] Eleanor Cook considers that Stevens' evocation of nature's 'aspic nipples' suggests *both* 'a nourishing meat-jelly and a sense of death', meaning 'the deadly asp or aspic that Cleopatra laid on her

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[186] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 176.
[187] Wallace Stevens, 'Adagia', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 909.
[188] Rajeev S. Patke, *The Long Poems of Wallace Stevens – An Interpretive Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 234.
[189] Wallace Stevens, 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words', *The Necessary Angel*, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 663.
[190] Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 131.
[191] Wallace Stevens, 'In the Carolinas', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 4.

breasts'.[192] This demonstrates the fusion of the 'deadly' and the 'nourishing' in a single ground ('honey') that underlies all nature.[193] The opening of poetry reveals the single ground in which life, death and language all have their root for Stevens. It is here Stevens who is 'for once' suckling on the sweet *being* of nature, as part of it, in contradistinction to the *becoming* of the Heraclitean looking river and days of 'Frogs Eat Butterflies', that 'seemed to suckle' on the 'arid being' of the planter.[194]

'In the Carolinas' may be a remembrance of Keats' 'A Song of Opposites', which references 'Cleopatra' 'With the aspic at her breast' and the 'sweetness of the pain' in context of uniting 'joy' and 'sorrow'.[195] Stevens' rewriting of Keats' principle seems to be to ground physical reality in it as well, at the exclusion of the 'Muses' and 'gods' (as mere 'names which mortals have given'), while universalising the concept of connection to include the poet as well.[196]

Future echoes of 'The Snow Man' are arguably to be found in the close of 'In the Carolinas'. Nature and the speaker appear to have become 'one' in the *poesis*, with the italics identifying the *otherness* of the universal voice of a cosmically connected whole. Here, the universal 'honey' and sweetness (depicted in the sweetness of the 'white' iris) can be read as prophesying the 'white' 'candor' of the 'snow' and 'ice' that will perform a similar function in 'The Snow Man':

> *The pine-tree sweetens my body*.
> *The white iris beautifies me.*[197]

[192] Eleanor Cook, *A Reader's Guide to Wallace Stevens*, p. 32.
[193] Ibid., p. 32.
[194] Wallace Stevens, 'Frogs Eat Butterflies. Snakes Eat Frogs. Hogs Eat Snakes. Men Eat Hogs', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 62.
[195] John Keats, 'A Song of Opposites', *The Works of John Keats* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 1994), p. 300.
[196] Ibid., p. 300.
[197] Wallace Stevens, 'In the Carolinas', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 4.

Stevens is opening the ground that in 'Credences of Summer', collected in *Transport to Summer* (1947), will include 'The physical pine' *and* 'the metaphysical pine' in his enlarged vision of a reality of connection.[198] 'The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician' had viewed the poem as a 'thing-in-itself', subject with all things to an *archê* of *becoming*. Poems such as 'In the Carolinas' demonstrate that from his first collection, Stevens was attempting to mine poems as 'things in themselves' in order to find an ultimate *archê* of cosmological connection that lies beneath. The *archê* is not created by the poet; 'it' is evoked as already 'there'. Poetry for Stevens, as for Parmenides, Heidegger and Gadamer, is a means of *opening* the *archê* of 'oneness' as a ground for a complete 'reality' that includes both the imagination and reality.

If the initial glimpse of the 'first idea' had been seen in the language of 'In the Carolinas', then a complete breakthrough is *enacted* in the 'The Snow Man'. Here Stevens' demonstrates what sort of mind it takes to be a 'thinker of the first idea'[199]:

> One must have a mind of winter
> To regard the frost and the boughs
> Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;
>
> And have been cold a long time
> To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
> The spruces rough in the distant glitter
>
> Of the January sun; and not to think
> Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
> In the sound of a few leaves,
>
> Which is the sound of the land
> Full of the same wind
> That is blowing in the same bare place

[198] Wallace Stevens, 'Credences of Summer', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 322.
[199] A Letter to Henry Church, October 28th, 1942. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, pp. 426 - 427.

> For the listener, who listens in the snow,
> And, nothing himself, beholds
> Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.[200]

Only the mind that is part of 'reality' will be free of applying the 'varnish and dirt' of the intellect, because thinking the 'first idea' is not to think yourself, but to think 'nothing' of which everything is comprised in mere *being*. Through the event of opening poetic language Stevens reduces mind and world down to the 'first idea' *itself*, which after all is not something seen, but only a way of seeing. Again it is the 'pine-trees' that are enveloped in the connection, perhaps evoking a sense of Stevens' yearning for the 'evergreen' nature of *being* as underlying total reality.

'One' is the first word and it sets the tone for a landscape extinguished in a blanket of white snow, a 'candor' free from the 'varnish and dirt'. There is no Heraclitean 'fire' of *becoming* here and static *being* is identified with the cold opposites of 'ice' and 'snow'. 'One' *must* make the 'mind' a revealing of 'winter' in order to 'behold' 'real reality', gilded in the oneness of ice. 'Behold' sounds the sense of 'be' and 'hold' in terms of a connection of thought and world in *being*. The earlier use of 'regard' as a passive viewing collapses the two of Latinate and Germanic language into 'one' meaning, when used alongside 'behold'. The natural world is 'in' the 'distant glitter' of the cold 'January sun', which serves to collapse the distance while making the sun 'glitter' like the ice on the natural objects, again engendering 'oneness'.

The command is 'not to think', not to reason, because reasoning divides the connection. If we don't think, empathetically or romantically, of a sense of 'misery' in the wind, then we will become as cold as the glittering sun of 'January', as nature shagged with ice, and as the snow. 'Misery' is reduced to just 'sound' collapsed into

[200] Wallace Stevens, 'The Snow Man', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 8.

the ‘sound of the land’ which itself seems to blow away with the ‘same wind’, with which it is ‘Full’, in what is now ‘the same bare place’. This ‘bare place’ is ‘For the listener’ who does not act, but ‘listens’, not to ‘misery’ or to ‘sound’, which have been collapsed into the ‘same bare place’, but to ‘nothing’. Mental attribution has vanished because what is being ‘looked at’ is the ‘nothing’ of the ‘first idea’ ‘itself’, as that which lies beneath mind and world.

Of ‘The Snow Man’, George S. Lensing has suggested that: ‘I can think of few poets, the Christian mystics of the dark night of the soul being a possible exception, who more ruthlessly and radically restrain the ego’.[201] In restraining the ego so ‘radically’, Stevens could be seen as correcting what he had inferred was Adam’s rationalist mistake in Eden. George Santayana, a philosopher concerned with art who Stevens knew personally, says:

> let me therefore aspire to see, reason and judge in no specific or finite manner – that is, not to see, reason or judge at all. So I shall be like the Infinite, nay I shall become one with the Infinite and (marvellous thought!) one with the One.[202]

Within these remarks that Stevens has read, in a work which Lentricchia says moved Stevens ‘to a lifetime of meditation’, Santayana has described the restraint of the ego that allows him to become ‘one with the One’. By advocating an unveiling (*aletheia*) as something that ‘thought suffers’, through the total restraint of judgement, Santayana’s comments connect with Parmenides’ concept of the ‘One’.[203] The ‘One’ for Parmenides is the totality of the ‘it is’, which in Stevens might be compared to the vision of ‘Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is’. Santayana has also

[201] Harold Bloom, ed., ‘George S. Lensing On the Poem’s Relation to “The Snow Man”’, *Wallace Stevens - Bloom’s Major Poets*, p. 144.
[202] George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, ed. by Herman J. Saatkamp Jr. & William G. Holzberger (Cambridge & London: The MIT Press, 1989), p. 14.
[203] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 469.

advocated a complete, total and utter alignment with Parmenides' concept of the 'One', calling it a 'marvellous thought!'[204]

As Lensing had intuited (and as I have suggested) it seems likely that Stevens' use of the 'One' in the opening line, 'One must have a mind of winter', is not used in the sense of the singular, rational 'I', but to imply a sense of all things reduced to 'One'. Krzystof Ziarek considers that in the concept of 'nothing' 'Heidegger and Stevens meet again', which they do, but perhaps Parmenides provides the ground of origin in which Stevens and Heidegger meet?[205] On the same page Santayana proceeds to say:

> In the primary stages, of course, mysticism does not venture to abolish all our ideas, or to renounce all our categories of thought. Thus many Christian mystics have still clung, out of respect for authority, to traditional theology, and many philosophical mystics have made some room for life and science in the postscripts which they, like Parmenides, have appended to the blank monism of their systems. But such concessions or hesitations are inconsistent with the mystical spirit which will never be satisfied, if fully developed and fearless, with anything short of Absolute Nothing.[206]

Santayana views the sections of Parmenides' poem that pertain more to 'life' and to 'science', as 'postscripts' to his 'blank monism'. However, though Santayana advocates that the mystic goes beyond Parmenides' 'concessions', Stevens has followed something that looks similar to Parmenides' rendering of the 'One', allowing for 'Nothing that is not there' and the 'nothing that is', in a similar way as Parmenides had contrasted the 'it is not' with the 'it is' of *being* in a poem.[207] The pre-Socratic ontological poetry is useful for the post-Kantian philosopher of art, or poet, in approaching a reconnection of mind and world at the base of reality, beneath

[204] George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, p. 14.
[205] Krzystof Ziarek, 'Stevens, Heidegger and the Foreignness of Poetry', *Wallace Stevens Across the Atlantic*, ed. by Bart Eeckhout and Edward Ragg (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 80.
[206] George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, p. 14.
[207] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 173.

the ‘varnish and dirt’. What gives weight to this conception in Stevens’ poetry is that it is certain that he encountered this kind of thinking. The process of reduction to the ‘nothing’ of *being* also has the interesting side-effect of cleansing reality of all romantic intoning for Stevens. Here we see an example of how modernism’s metaphysical consciousness re-grounds the post-Kantian project on new universal terms.

Though this ‘reality’ grounded in ‘nothing’ could appear empty, an early reading by Hillis Miller had considered the ‘nothing’ to be *being*, the fully reduced state of mind, nature and poet. He says:

> the nothing is not nothing. It is. It is being. Being is a pervasive power, visible nowhere in itself and yet present and visible in all things…Being is not a thing like other things and therefore can only appear to man as nothing, but it is what all things must participate in if they are to exist at all.[208]

However, Bloom suggests that the interpretation of the ‘nothing’ as *being*, works for the later poetry, but not quite so much for ‘The Snow Man’.[209] Bloom argues that the ‘listener’ is not made inhuman by a reduction to amorphous *being*:

> The listener, reduced to nothing, remains human because he beholds something shagged and rough, barely figurative, yet still a figuration rather than a bareness. This “nothing” is the most minimal of abstracted fictions, and yet still it is a fiction.[210]

Certainly Bloom has a point as the evocation of *being* would always seem to be made through yet another word or metaphor, never finally revealed as *being* ‘itself’. However, this does not see the poem as a process of unveiling (*aletheia*) that leads to the nakedness of that final line. In *Adagia* Stevens would write that: ‘The

[208] J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality*, p. 279.
[209] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, p. 62.
[210] Ibid., p. 63.

thing seen becomes the thing unseen'.[211] By the time the speaker is 'reduced to nothing' he has passed through the revealing of the branches disclosed in the single bond of 'ice', to mere 'revealing' 'itself'. He has created a sense of a bond of 'oneness' from which he brings us to its nature as a 'nothing'. He no longer sees ontic reality, rather, he 'beholds' the 'nothing' of ontological 'reality', he beholds 'nothing'. In context of the poem the 'nothing' of himself is no different from the 'nothing that is'. As Santayana says, he has become 'one with the One.'[212] That this sense of *being* is communicated through language is of little concern to a post-Kantian philosopher such as Gadamer, who we saw concluding earlier that: '*Being that can be understood is language*.'[213] What Bloom's argument does not allow for is that it was a pre-Socratic such as Parmenides who had achieved his own connection with the 'One' through the creation of a new *poesis*. Poetic language unveils the 'nothing' of *being* that lies beneath the 'varnish and dirt' for this thought.

If naming is an act of unveiling as it is for Heidegger and Gadamer, then the form of the poem discloses *being*, just as an appearance in reality does. In reading the long sentence that constitutes the poem the reader must look to the next successive line to complete the next unveiling of *phusis* (that includes the naturalised mind that is 'of winter'). It is only the last line that unveils 'Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is' which Hillis Miller's early appraisal had suggested was *being*. In the satisfaction of completing the sentence Stevens has reduced language (as a 'thing-in-itself') to the unveiling of mere revealing itself. Through its use of language, the poem takes its reader to the threshold of the 'thing', to the thought of the 'nothing' of *being* in which all things are grounded. It is in the thought of nothing

[211] Wallace Stevens, 'Adagia', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 906.
[212] George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, p. 14.
[213] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 470.

that mind is reduced to opening that opens nothing, the vanishing of the ground of the subjective self, or the radical, ruthless restraint of the ego. The poem resists rationalist and transcendental idealist terms, in a radical effort to connect in the universal ground of the 'thing-in-itself', which for Stevens includes both poetry and reality.

Ideas of Order – The Way in Which Order Appears

Stevens' reduction to the 'nothing' of *being* in 'The Snow Man', *could* be linked to the horror and revulsion of the earliest of the poems collected in *Ideas of Order* (1936), 'The Sun This March' (1930). The painful poem of poetic reawakening after six years of what Bloom calls 'almost total silence', states that[214]: 'Cold is our element and winter's air' seems to revive a sense of the 'mind of winter' that immediately: 'Brings voices as of lions coming down.'[215] The apparent terror this induces manifests itself in a desperate cry: 'Oh! Rabbi, rabbi, fend my soul for me/ And true savant of this dark nature be.'[216] This 'rabbi' may be offered in an ironic tone, but the 'fend my soul' and reference to 'this dark nature', seems entirely serious. The 'turning spirit in an earlier self' and the 'dark nature' seem to recall the reduction to *becoming* observed in the *Harmonium* poem, 'Domination of Black'. Equally, the references to the 'cold' 'element' and 'winters air' evoke the reduction to what Hillis Miller had called *being* in 'The Snow Man'. The terror seems to stem from the mind and world being subject to the same universal fate, which is utterly dispassionate.

[214] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, p. 88.
[215] Wallace Stevens, 'The Sun this March', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 109.
[216] Ibid., p. 109.

By 1936 the thought of ‘winter’s air’ in ‘The Sun This March’ is passed over in favour of the lines from the poem eventually chosen to open *Ideas of Order*, ‘Farewell to Florida’, which begins with: 'Go on, high ship'.[217] The poem of departure is seen to reject both ‘The leaves in which the wind kept up its sound’ of ‘The Snow Man’, and ‘the ever-freshened Keys’ of ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’ (1934).[218] Stevens is seen to attempt to reject the preceding conceptions of the ‘first idea’ as both a ‘nothing’ (in its Northern male form) and the ‘inhuman’ singer/artificer (in its Southern female form), saying: 'Her mind had bound me round'.[219] In ‘The Snow Man’ Stevens had found ‘her’ totality through his own mind. In ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’ he would himself be a part of ‘her’ mind. In ‘Farewell to Florida’ however, she is gone, having left her ‘skin upon the floor’.[220] I would argue that the ‘skin upon the floor’ is a literal reference to the language of ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’, which as we shall see, surrounds the ‘first idea’ as the metaphysical ‘beyond’ of the singing ‘she’. The serpentine ‘her’ who had left ‘her’ skin is Ananke (‘Necessity’), who’s ‘aspic nipples’ had previously vented ‘honey’, and ‘she’ and her ‘aspic’ nature will be discussed in a later chapter with reference to parallels concerning Parmenides’ sense of *being*.

Although ‘Farewell to Florida’ opens *Ideas of Order*, in both chronology and intent, it really points to the more socially engaging poetry that Stevens would attempt to write through the later 1930’s and early 1940’s, and in which the ‘first idea’ would once again be re-imagined to incorporate social existence. The pointed effort to reject ‘Ananke’ that ‘Farewell to Florida’ announces would itself ultimately

[217] Wallace Stevens, ‘The Sun this March’ & ‘Farewell to Florida’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 109 & 97.
[218] Wallace Stevens, ‘Farewell to Florida’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 97.
[219] Ibid., p. 97.
[220] Ibid., p. 97.

fail, although to advantageous dramatic effect for the poet, as poems from Stevens' later period such as 'The Auroras of Autumn' will show. The essential development of this period of Stevens' poetry is in line with Bloom's broad assessment of Stevens, which suggests that: 'The three stages in him are called: Reduction to the First Idea → Being unable to Live with the First Idea alone → Re-imagining the First Idea…'[221]

'The Idea of Order at Key West', written before 'Farewell to Florida', attempts to 'Re-imagine the First Idea' in a way which shows a nuanced development from the reduction to the 'nothing' of 'The Snow Man'. In a sense the poem also performs a 'Reduction to the First Idea', but here it is physical reality *seen* as grounded in the 'first idea', not reality consumed by the 'nothing' of the 'first idea' alone. What is most fully realised in 'The Idea of Order at Key West' is a turning, a looking out from the 'first idea' as a principle of 'order', rather than a reduction of the mind to the pure 'nothing'. In this regard the importance of the poem to Stevens' future direction cannot be underestimated.

Echoing Hillis Miller, Eeckhout confirms that in Stevens the word 'idea':

> is not the familiar modern meaning of "idea" but a reactivation of the word's original meaning in ancient Greek, from before the days of Plato. Originally, *idea* referred to the realm of the visible; deriving from the verb *idein* (to see), it meant as much as "look, semblance."[222]

As we saw earlier with Stevens' account of the 'first idea', it is how a thing appears from itself (once cleared of its 'varnish and dirt') that is important, not what 'I' think about it. What 'I' think about it is only what is added to the 'thing', what is covering it over. The 'mind of winter' had entreated us 'not to think'. In the case ahead concerning the Key West poem, I will argue that what the universe 'shows' for

[221] Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, p. 188.
[222] Bart Eeckhout, 'Stevens and Philosophy', *The Cambridge Companion To Wallace Stevens*, p. 108.

Stevens, as its *eidos*, parallels an inherent *technê* (art or skill) which it is the poet's task to read out from *phusis*. Further, I want to show how this development illuminates structures that subsequently appear in important poems that followed, such as 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' (1937) and 'Of Modern Poetry' (1940). What I am calling *technê* is presented in the Key West poem as the inherent 'order' which naturally runs from the ontological ground, on through nature, and into the language and form of the poem as its antipodes. *Poesis* here is the result of the 'expressings' of 'being' seen in the 'order' of things, it is not a poetry that attempts a reduction of things to the 'nothing' of *being*, as has been suggested of 'The Snow Man'.

Certainly 'The Idea of Order' can be read as a subjective 'idea', as Bloom has read it. Yet here we depart from Bloom by suggesting that Stevens' 'Re-imagining of the First Idea' is an alignment of the poem with what resembles a universal *eidos* of *technê*, the 'idea of order'. Critchley outlines the issue:

> For Bloom, like Riddel, the poem is entirely an act of the mind without reference to reality, a view that he ingeniously, but somewhat obsessively, traces back to Emerson, Whitman and the tradition of American transcendentalism.[223]

However, Robert Rehder seems more convincing in suggesting that: 'The poet's function in this poem is to listen rather than create'.[224] This approach is reminiscent of Stevens' 'listener, who listens' in 'The Snow Man' in order to allow an 'unveiling'. Yet this is not the unveiling of a 'nothing' to which everything is reduced, but the unveiling of an inherent order in which everything stands. The poet must allow the *eidos* to step forth. In this sense a *poesis* is an appearing, an *eidos*. This method suggests a post-Kantian stance that denies the ordering power of the

[223] Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are – Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens,* p. 27.
[224] Harold Bloom, ed., 'Robert Rehder on Metaphor', *Wallace Stevens - Bloom's Major Poets*, p. 63.

mind and allows the order at hand to reveal itself. This appraisal is conducive with Stevens' own assessment in 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction':

> But to impose is not
> To discover. To discover an order as of
> A season, to discover summer and know it,
>
> To discover winter and know it well, to find,
> Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all[225]

This finding that does not 'impose' is contrary to Critchley's suggestion that: 'We find an order in things. This is not an order that is given, but one that we give it.'[226] The 'song' of 'order' is already there, it is not what the poet is injecting into reality, it is what the poet is trying to hear and align his art with.

Heidegger, mining the pre-Socratic ground of *phusis* and *technê*, provides a parallel for Stevens' sense of the word 'order', which I am suggesting resembles an inherent *technê* (what Stevens calls 'Arranging', 'ordering') at Key West:

> *phusis* gets narrowed down by contrast with *technē* - which means neither art nor technology but a kind of *knowledge*, the knowing disposal over the free planning and arranging and controlling of arrangements. *Technē* is generating, building, as a knowing pro-ducing.[227]

This inherent 'knowledge' of *technê* narrows down *phusis* for Heidegger and in Stevens' poem it is evident as a sound ('key') that is heard *in* nature, not as something that originates with the poet. Just as *phusis* ('nature') was a consuming force in *Harmonium* poems such as 'Sunday Morning', 'Frogs Eat Butterflies' and 'Anatomy of Monotony', so at Key West chaotic nature rears up, threatening to destroy:

> The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,

[225] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 349.
[226] Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are – Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, p. 57.
[227] Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 18.

> Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped
> On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres
> Of sky and sea.[228]

Yet Stevens senses that there is something more inherent than the sublime theatre of chaotic nature, more even than the appearing, the *eidos* of things, there is an inherent *technê* that orders the semblance of nature, of which he appears to see the human mind as an extension:

> If it was only the dark voice of the sea
> That rose, or even colored by many waves;
> If it was only the outer voice of sky
> And cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled,
> However clear, it would have been deep air,
> The heaving speech of air, a summer sound
> Repeated in a summer without end
> And sound alone. But it was more than that,
> More even than her voice, and ours...[229]

Alongside the theatrical confines of chaotic nature and the 'speech of air' (the underlying 'nothing'), there is something that is 'more than that': An inner order that appears, like the order of the seasons that are 'Repeated', not like the endless repetition of a 'summer sound', which is reminiscent of the 'sound alone' of 'The Snow Man'. Stevens has embraced the *universal* nature of the 'nothing' of *being*, but has recast it as an appearing of *technê* which underlies all things. In a sense, Stevens could be seen to be uncovering the technical ground for the universal 'stage' that will appear in 'Of Modern Poetry', and which connects the imagination *and* reality in the 'more than that' (*technê*) of his universal art.[230]

[228] Wallace Stevens, 'The Idea of Order at Key West', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 105.
[229] Ibid., p. 105.
[230] Wallace Stevens, 'Of Modern Poetry', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 219.

Again, it is Heidegger, who through the pre-Socratic thought can provide a language for this ‘more than that’, in its pressing back against the overwhelming, and also for the role of art in aligning with that containment, or taming, of *phusis*:

> *technē* characterizes the *deinon*, the violence-doing, in its decisive basic trait; for to do violence is to need to use violence against the over-whelming: the knowing struggle to set Being, which was formerly closed off, into what appears as beings.[231]

Technê, as the fundamental semblance of nature, is in Heidegger’s terms entirely aligned with the nature of the poem, which is itself a *technê* that allows for the appearing of beings in their *being*. In other words, on Stevens' universal 'stage' his art can connect the *technê* inherent in the ‘lion locked in stone’ (reality/nature), with the *technê* of the ‘lion in the lute’ (imagination/poetry). This is a playing together that Stevens will enact in ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’, although only once he has re-imagined the ‘first idea’ again as we shall see.[232]

The change at ‘Key West’, as compared with ‘The Snow Man’, is that the poem no longer reduces to the ‘first idea’, but rather expresses the ‘first idea’ through the poem as *technê*, which can interface with the *technê* in nature. This allows nature to be connected to poetry through the unity of ‘order’, an ‘order’ that the poet (who attempts to stand apart) can control, thus equally controlling the chaotic aspects of nature (*tuche*). Language is still a ‘thing-in-itself’ for Stevens, but poetry aligned with the universal *eidos* of *technê* has become a means of showing that the imagination and reality are a single totality, from which the poet can begin to create new forms from the enlarged ground. The creation of this 'new stage' opens the temptation to manipulate *technê* as the single ground of all existence, connected

[231] Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, pp. 170 - 171.
[232] Wallace Stevens, ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 143.

to Stevens' own imagination as he starts to become what in 'Of Modern Poetry' he will express as the 'metaphysician in the dark'.[233]

The terms of the poem as connected to a universal *technê* indicate how it can be read. Schleiermacher had referred to hermeneutics as an 'art' of 'understanding'.[234] He uses the term 'art' (*Kunst*), partly in the Greek sense of *technê* (by which he means ability, capacity) and partly in Kant's sense, 'that something cannot be understood as *art* merely via the rules of the particular form of articulation.'[235] Alternatively, Gadamer states that 'understanding belongs to the being of that which is understood.'[236] Gadamer considers the Platonic and Socratic conception of *technê* as follows:

> For we find action governed by knowledge in an exemplary form where the Greeks speak of technê. This is the skill, the knowledge of the craftsman who knows how to make some specific thing. The question is whether moral knowledge is knowledge of this kind. This would mean that it was knowledge of how to make oneself. Does man learn to make himself what he ought to be, in the same way that the craftsman learns to make things according to his plan and will? Does man project himself on an eidos of himself in the same way that the craftsman carries within himself an eidos of what he is trying to make and embody in his material? We know that Socrates and Plato did apply the concept of techne to the concept of man's being, and it is undeniable that they did discover something true here.[237]

With this in mind we can see why in 'The Man With The Blue Guitar' Stevens will say that 'From this I shall evolve a man'.[238] For Stevens at Key West, he is not yet ready to 'evolve a man', literally to control the *eidos* of 'man'. Rather, here he is suggesting that a *technê* is not a subjective projection, but something to which *we*

[233] Wallace Stevens, 'Of Modern Poetry', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 219.
[234] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, trans. and ed. by Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 3.
[235] Ibid., p. 3.
[236] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. xxviii.
[237] Ibid., pp. 312 - 313.
[238] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 149.

belong. Stevens would begin the late poem, 'In a Bad Time', collected in *The Auroras of Autumn* with:

> How mad would you have to be to say, "He beheld
> An order and thereafter he belonged
> To it"? He beheld the order of the northern sky.[239]

The remembrance is of the 'northern sky' of 'The Auroras of Autumn', but its context of beholding an 'order' runs back to 'The Idea of Order at Key West'. 'Mad' or not it is certainly what the poem proposes. 'Order' is the reductive, unifying force here and it is only in 'Blue Guitar' that Stevens will attempt to manipulate that *new* and enlarged ground to construct a 'man'.

However, although this kind of reading may illustrate the ontological ground of Stevens' reversal of Kant's 'Copernican Revolution' (the return of the 'idea' to the 'thing-in-itself' as its *eidos*) it provides no explanation of why Stevens' 'vatic lines' speak through references to art.[240] Stevens' modernism is highlighted by the poem refusing to acknowledge its own status as 'a work of art', rather, by aligning itself with an ontological ground and expressing that ground *through* art, the poem (as a form) becomes the place where art, mind and world are united. In other words it avoids the 'jarring' of the isolated jar of *technê* that stands against 'slovenly' nature, regardless of whether that jar is indicative of mass produced kitchenware or Keats' 'Sylvan historian'.[241]

If we step back from the Key West poem, what it shows is a woman singing, a woman wandering through 'theatrical distances', a woman described by Stevens as an 'artificer' of the world, its 'maker'. This woman, who at one level is the

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[239] Wallace Stevens, 'In a Bad Time', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 367.
[240] Wallace Stevens, 'Large Red Man Reading', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 365.
[241] Wallace Stevens, 'Anecdote of the Jar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 60. & John Keats, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', *The Works of John Keats*, p. 233.

personification of the fundamental conception of the appearance of order, who sings ‘beyond the genius of the sea’ (the word ‘beyond’ signifying the ontological ‘depth’) is expressing ‘her’ fundamental ground through artistic forms, through song, revealing ‘keener sounds’.[242] ‘She’ serves as that ontological ground and its appearing as *phusis*, through the theatre of appearance, which includes the human world. Her ‘striding’ and ‘singing’ are the *constancy* of the *eidos* of *technê*, of the appearing of order. It would be a mistake to read this woman singing as a subjective ‘she’, as simply an object of the poem. ‘She’ is not subjective but cosmological and ‘her’ ‘singing’ is from the ‘beyond’ of the ontological that lies outside reality, outside of poetry, but to which all things are deemed to be ‘connected’.

In 'Domination of Black' it was 'the color of the heavy hemlocks' that 'Came striding' out of the black sublime.[243] When Stevens says 'we beheld her striding there alone', he means that 'we' can 'behold' the ontological unity of the appearance of order in a similar way to which he beheld the 'Nothing that is not there' and 'the nothing that is' from 'The Snow Man'.[244] The difference is that here Stevens is not reducing everything to the 'first idea', rather he is watching and listening to the unveiling of an ontological order, in which everything is deemed to be grounded. 'Farewell to Florida' speaks of a transition from 'my' subjective 'North of cold', to:

> Her South of pine and coral and coraline sea,
> Her home, not mine, in the ever-freshened Keys,
> Her days, her oceanic nights, calling
> For music, for whisperings from the reefs.[245]

[242] Wallace Stevens, ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 106.
[243] Wallace Stevens, ‘Domination of Black’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 7.
[244] Wallace Stevens, ‘The Snow Man’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 8.
[245] Wallace Stevens, ‘Farewell to Florida’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 97.

'Her' 'calling' and 'music' that come from the 'oceanic nights' and 'reefs' is the *eidos* of objective reality, that Stevens has combined with his own subjective imagination, in the freshened 'Key' of 'Key West'.

Stevens had written in *Adagia* that: 'Poetry is often a revelation of the elements of appearance.'[246] Stevens' own art in this period is the closing of the imagination and reality into a oneness that attempts to connect with *technê*, as the fundamental ground of existence that underlies everything. Stevens says: 'Art, broadly, is the form of life or the sound or color of life. Considered as form (in the abstract) it is often indistinguishable from life itself.'[247] Further that: 'poetry is a part of the structure of reality...poetry and the structure of reality are one'.[248] In other words poems are 'things in themselves', subject to *technê* as all things are. What reality needs according to Stevens' point of view, is a poetic maker to help create an enlarged sense of 'human' at the axis of the imagination and reality, an axis of *technê*.

Schelling can provide words to help express this galvanising of mind and world:

> If aesthetic intuition is merely transcendental intuition become objective, it is self-evident that art is at once the only true and eternal organ and document of philosophy, which ever and again continues to speak to us of what philosophy cannot depict in external form, namely the unconscious element in acting and producing, and its original identity with the conscious. Art is paramount to the philosopher, precisely because it opens to him, as it were, the holy of holies, where burns in eternal and original unity, as if in a single flame, that which in nature and history is rent asunder, and in life and action, no less than in thought, must forever fly apart.[249]

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[246] Wallace Stevens, 'Adagia', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 914.
[247] Ibid., p. 901.
[248] Wallace Stevens, 'Three Academic Pieces', *The Necessary Angel*, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 692.
[249] F.W.J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, p. 231.

Stevens had quoted the following from Ernst Cassirer's *Essay on Man* in *The Necessary Angel*:

Schelling declared in his *System of Transcendental Idealism* that art is the consummation of philosophy...The true poem is not the work of the individual artist; it is the universe itself, the one work of art which is forever perfecting itself.[250]

What is fascinating for our study here is that Schelling turns back to the pre-Socratics for the origin of this process of bringing the 'external form' of philosophy into presence:

Philosophy was born and nourished by poetry in the infancy of knowledge, and with it all those sciences it has guided toward perfection; we may thus expect them, on completion to flow back like so many individual streams into the universal ocean of poetry from which they took their source. Nor is it in general difficult to say what the medium for this return of science to poetry will be; for in mythology such a medium existed, before the occurrence of a breach now seemingly beyond repair.[251]

As Schelling infers, there is an older mythological origin for this thought that is contained in its talk of art and philosophy. We will address the terms of this mythological ground in a later chapter.

The inherent order unveiled in the Key West poem is united with the order of human culture through the order of a new *poesis*. *Phusis* (nature) and *nomos* (culture) are united in the *technê* to which the poem is also connected. The act of making poetry opens the single ground of a fundamental *technê* in which the cosmos is founded for Stevens, and it is now that he can *turn* towards social existence and include it in the universal ground of a remaking out of the 'nothing':

> Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,
> Why, when the singing ended and we turned
> Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,
> The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,

[250] Wallace Stevens, 'Imagination as Value', *The Necessary Angel*, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 726.
[251] F.W.J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, p. 232.

> As the night descended, tilting in the air,
> Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
> Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,
> Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.[252]

Once the song that unites all polarities has ended, culture (*nomos*) has been transformed in the 'enchanting night' and is now part of the one universal order that incorporates both the imagination and reality. For Stevens' Darwinian thinking, humanity, as a part of *phusis*, is composite to the 'intelligence' of *phusis*, part of the *eidos* of *technê*.[253] 'Our nature is her nature' as he says in 'Anatomy of Monotony'.[254] The conclusion he has reached from this is that we and our *nomos* (culture) are an extension of 'her' nature. It suggests that we have constructed the 'order' of our world, meaning the very Euclidean sounding geometry of our world as the 'glassy lights' of the town, and the 'lights in the fishing boats', as an extension out of the order of the 'fiery poles' and 'emblazoned zones' in the night sky. The manmade, 'glassy lights', *reflect* the order of the 'fiery poles'. Both are part of nature. In his *Adagia* Stevens notes that: 'All of our ideas come from the natural world: Trees = umbrellas.'[255] Humanity is seen as an extension of the *technê* in *phusis*, literally born out of the universe.

Through a poetic act the night descends and merges with the human *nomos*. This merging is shown to be complete by the night seeming to tilt, which is the 'tilting' of the boats and their masts on the water, connecting the natural night sky and the manmade. Such an effort of connection through art points to 'Blue Guitar' which will symbolize this artistic attempt to 'patch' reality together.[256] The 'glassy

[252] Wallace Stevens, 'The Idea of Order at Key West', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 105.
[253] Wallace Stevens, 'Of Modern Poetry', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 143.
[254] Wallace Stevens, 'Anatomy of Monotony', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 90.
[255] Wallace Stevens, 'Adagia', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 903.
[256] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 135.

lights' of the town and in the fishing boats master the night and portion out the sea precisely because they are now equal points of order to the 'emblazoned zones' and 'fiery poles'. *Technê* in nature is *one* thing for Stevens and includes the poem because language is a 'thing-in-itself' like any other. Wielding the universal imagination, as part of reality, the poet can press back and manipulate the *technê* in nature *and* the manmade as one 'thing'. The 'deepening' of the night highlights the new link between humanity and nature. This is the 'order' stepping forth as a *poesis* that the poem has captured. The inherent *technê* points to the 'ghostlier demarcations' and 'keener sounds' of 'our origins' for Stevens, as he places mind and world in a single universal ground which the poem claims to unveil.[257] The poem's chronology of capture shows a similarity to Heidegger's ontological chronology for how beauty appears as 'truth':

> The beautiful does not lie in form, but only because the *forma* once took its light from Being as the isness of what is. Being at that time made its advent as *eidos*. The *idea* fits itself into the *morphe*. The *sunolon*, the unitary whole of *morphe* and *hule*, namely the *ergon*, *is* in the manner of *energeia*. This mode of presence becomes the *actualitas* of the *ens actu*. The *actualitas* becomes reality. Reality becomes objectivity. Objectivity becomes experience. In the way in which, for the world determined by the West, that which is, is as the real, there is concealed a peculiar confluence of beauty with truth.[258]

It is appropriate to say that Stevens' art has 'captured' the underlying 'metaphysics' and reduced the imagination and reality to *one* 'thing'. Stevens' poem has become the place where the apparent 'opposition' of art and nature and culture and nature could be 'made whole'. Stevens' art has captured the single *eidos* to which it has forcefully (*deinon*) reduced all appearing. In *Adagia* Stevens says: 'The

[257] Wallace Stevens, 'The Idea of Order at Key West', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 106.
[258] Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by, Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennial, 2001), p. 79.

aesthetic order includes all other orders but is not limited to them.'[259] Art and philosophy have become one, just as they had been at the birth of philosophy, as Schelling had suggested.

The *allowing* of the first five stanzas of this poem to unveil themselves in the tidal rhythm is an enforced naiveté that again subordinates the rational 'I'. An 'idea' becomes an *eidos* of the 'thing-in-itself' rather than an intellectual idea. 'Ignorance is one of the sources of poetry' says Stevens in *Adagia*, and in order to 'see the sun' 'clearly in the idea of it', one must 'see the sun again with an ignorant eye'.[260] Kingsley notes that: 'Ignorance for Parmenides is only what's ignorance in terms of ordinary human experience, with all its narrowness and limitations.'[261] The terms of such 'ignorance' echoes the collapse of the ego into the 'mind of winter'. Stevens' reversal of idealism could be judged to withhold the terms of a full reduction, like that experienced in 'the mind of winter', at the point at which he acknowledges the 'Other', 'Ramon Fernandez' (for the singing woman is part of the ontological unveiling). Like Stevens and his companion in 'How To Live. What To Do' (also collected in *Ideas of Order*) they appear to stand above, on 'solid' ground. The question remains however as to how real Ramon Fernandez really is for Stevens, who denied he was thinking of the critic and minor philosopher of that name when he fashioned him into his fiction?[262] The 'godlike' modern artist (reminiscent of

[259] Wallace Stevens, 'Adagia', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 905.
[260] Wallace Stevens, 'Adagia' & 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 911 & 329.
[261] Peter Kingsley, *In The Dark Places of Wisdom* (Inverness, CA: The Golden Sufi Centre, 2004), p. 65.
[262] A Letter to Bernard Heringman, September 1st, 1953. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 798. We also know from James Longenbach that the person of that name was a critic familiar to Stevens from the pages of the *Nouvelle revue française*, the *Partisan Review*, and the *Criterion*, and that Fernandez was a politically charged literary critic who had written on the subject of, 'I Came Near to Being a Fascist'. (James Longenbach, *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 161-162) Perhaps the point is that Ramon Fernandez has been fictionalized in the moment of being caught up into Stevens' poem.

Parmenides' references to 'mortals') is certainly standing apart from the *totality* which he has seen, and will increasingly attempt to manipulate that ground in constructing the *eidos* of 'man'. It was only 'thereafter', as 'In A Bad Time' suggests, that Stevens realised that he had in fact reduced himself to this totalizing order, that he 'belonged' to it.[263] What 'man' needs, at this stage in Stevens' development, is to be 'created' anew from the universal ground to which humanity is unwittingly attached. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the longer, more meditative forms of poem that Stevens would write for the rest of his life emerge in this period, in an attempt to tackle that ambitious objective. Stevens' effort to reject 'Ananke' or any other Muse in 'Farewell to Florida' appears to have been a flight from the 'first idea' presenting 'itself' as anything resembling the romantic imagination, in favour of a social engagement (on ontological terms) with the pressing realities of the modern world. However, in order to achieve that objective the terms of the 'first idea' would need to be re-imagined once again.

'The Man with the Blue Guitar' and *Parts of a World* – The 'Struggle' to Answer One's Critics

If Stevens' poetry is concerned to write out of a ground of the meeting of the imagination and reality, then it is not surprising that that art has been accused of being socially detached. Lentricchia has made the case that:

> How much more responsible (and guilty) can you get than, on the one hand, writing the rarefied lyric that Stevens wrote, and, on the other, asserting that poets help people live their lives?[264]

Following Stanley Burnshaw's review of *Ideas of Order* Stevens attempted a more consciously public poetry. This was signified through the working title of a new

[263] Wallace Stevens, 'In a Bad Time', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 367.
[264] Frank Lentricchia, *Modernist Quartet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 152.

poem entitled 'Aphorisms on Society', a title which the publisher, given the choice, changed to 'Owl's Clover' (1936).[265] Stevens acknowledged that the original title was 'pretentious', but felt that it brought out 'for the reader the element that is common to all the poems.'[266]

The attempt was not necessarily a critical success. Ben Belitt's review of *Ideas of Order* and *Owl's Clover* in *The Nation*, suggested that Stevens' 'problem' was that he had 'moved to formal discourse in the quest for order and certitude', but that 'his art has not up to the present permitted him to pursue such discourse or his temperament to accept it.'[267] Stevens realised that Belitt was suggesting that 'Owl's Clover' was 'a lot of Easter Eggs' and that the reviewer had identified 'a difficulty that I have long been conscious of and with which I am constantly struggling.'[268]

A few months after his exchanges with Belitt, Stevens was writing to his publisher to announce his efforts to compose 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' (1937), a series of short poems that he suggests 'deal with the relation or balance between imagined things and real things'.[269] This looks like a hasty retreat to familiar ground, where Stevens can engage his demanding audience ('you must', 'Do not speak to us of the greatness of poetry') on his own terms.[270] Here Stevens paints himself as having withdrawn:

> And I am merely a shadow hunched
>
> Above the arrowy, still strings,
> The maker of a thing yet to be made[271]

[265] A Letter to Ronald Lane Latimer, May 16th, 1936. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 311.
[266] Ibid., p. 311.
[267] A Letter to Ben Belitt, December 12th, 1936. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 314.
[268] Ibid., p. 314.
[269] A Letter to Ronald Lane Latimer, March 17th, 1937. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 316.
[270] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 135 - 136.
[271] Ibid., p. 138.

The poet it seems is the 'shearsman of sorts' who through the imaginative qualities of the 'blue guitar', namely the imagination represented through art, can make the world whole. What I want to highlight here is that Stevens has withdrawn, but in the foreground of his poetry, he begins to present some references to a universalized reality that might be described as a 'horde of destructions'.[272] In what follows I will argue that the threat and outbreak of world war resulted in Stevens substituting his sense of a universal order (*technê*) for a sense of universal conflict. The imagination and reality remain connected, but not through an inherent *technê*, rather through an inherent state of struggle.

The initial means of presenting this 'horde of destructions' is through art, namely through a sense of Pablo Picasso's art. As we have noted, Costello confirms that in 'Blue Guitar' Stevens appears to describe 'Picasso's early (pre-cubist) painting of *The Old Guitarist* ("I sing a hero's head, large eye")'.[273] Stevens himself appears to deny the connection with this specific Picasso painting, but in context of what the poem is seeking to achieve, a connection with Picasso is definite:[274]

> Is this picture of Picasso's, this "hoard
> Of destructions", a picture of ourselves,
>
> Now, an image of our society?[275]

Stevens had referred to Picasso's 'hoard of destructions' in *The Necessary Angel* with: 'Does not the saying of Picasso that a picture is a horde of destructions also say that a poem is a horde of destructions?'[276] Stevens had also suggested of the poems

[272] Wallace Stevens, 'The Relations Between Poetry and Painting', *The Necessary Angel*, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 741.
[273] Bonnie Costello, 'Stevens and Painting', *The Cambridge Companion To Wallace Stevens*, p. 171.
[274] A Letter to Renato Poggioli, July 1st, 1953. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 786.
[275] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 141.
[276] Wallace Stevens, 'The Relations Between Poetry and Painting', *The Necessary Angel*, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 741.

of ‘Blue Guitar’ that: ‘Perhaps it would be better to say that what they really deal with is the painter’s problem of realization’.[277] Picasso’s ‘hoard of destructions’ forms ‘an image of our society’ because it is a *technê* that is smashed to pieces, for the sole reason that the society it reflects is becoming increasingly fractured. Stevens is announcing that his poetry will follow suit. The question here then, in face of Lentricchia’s critique, is in what *way* does Stevens believe that poets ‘help people live their lives’?[278]

To draw a crude philosophical parallel with Picasso’s ‘horde of destructions’, we will need to revisit a particular fragment of Heraclitus’ that we have already encountered:

> Couples are things whole and things not whole, what is drawn together and what is drawn asunder, the harmonious and the discordant. The one is made up of all things, and all things issue from the one.[279]

Burnet suggests that: ‘The truth Herakleitos proclaimed was that the world is at once one and many, and that it is just the “opposite tension” of the opposites that constitutes the unity of the One.’[280] Of poem XI and other sections of ‘Blue Guitar’, Stevens had said:

> The chord destroys its elements by uniting them in the chord. They then cease to exist separately. On the other hand, discord exaggerates the separation between elements. These propositions are stated in a variety of terms: ivy on stone, people in cities, men in masses.[281]

If Stevens had embraced a principle of this kind from Heraclitus, then it may have provided a means for connecting society, the poem and the world in a single ontological ground which Stevens as guitarist/metaphysician could manipulate. He

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[277] A Letter to Ronald Lane Latimer, March 17th, 1937. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 316.
[278] Frank Lentricchia, *Modernist Quartet*, p. 152.
[279] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 137.
[280] Ibid., p. 143.
[281] A Letter to Hi Simons, August 10th, 1940. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 363.

could literally ‘play’ the ground between harmony and discord in Gadamer’s sense. Towards the end of ‘Blue Guitar’, poem XXXI appears to exemplify this approach:

> How long and late the pheasant sleeps...
> The employer and employee contend,
>
> Combat, compose their droll affair.
> The bubbling sun will bubble up,
>
> Spring sparkle and the cock-bird shriek.
> The employer and employee will hear
>
> And continue their affair. The shriek
> Will rack the thickets. There is no place,
>
> Here, for the lark fixed in the mind,
> In the museum of the sky. The cock
>
> Will claw sleep. Morning is not sun,
> It is this posture of the nerves,
>
> As if a blunted player clutched
> The nuances of the blue guitar.
>
> It must be this rhapsody or none,
> The rhapsody of things as they are.[282]

The peace of the sleeping pheasant is about to be disturbed. As Heidegger suggests, ‘The dots tell what is kept silent’....[283] 'Blue Guitar' was published in 1937 when the Spanish Civil War was underway and the build-up to World War II was in motion. Again it is through language that Stevens appears to merge society, the poem and the world through a single ontological concept. The humans ‘contend’, ‘combat’ and ‘compose’. Yet ‘compose’, though it alliterates, seems out of place, unless Stevens means to link the idea of poetic and artistic composition with this human struggle?

Heraclitus had also said that: ‘Men do not know how what is at variance agrees with itself. It is an attunement of opposite tensions, like that of the bow and

[282] Wallace Stevens, ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 149.
[283] Martin Heidegger, ‘What Are Poets For?’, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 137.

the lyre.'[284] As we noted earlier, Heraclitus' word for 'attunement' is *harmoniē*. He had said that: 'Homer was wrong in saying: "Would that strife might perish from among gods and men!" He did not see that he was praying for the destruction of the universe; for, if his prayer were heard, all things would pass away.'[285] In Heraclitus the struggle of opposites amounts to 'attunement'. Within the poem, this harmonious struggle has left no place for the 'lark fixed in the mind,/ In the museum of the sky'. It is tempting to conclude that unlike Keats' nightingale, the bird that 'Will claw sleep' and 'Will rack the thickets' is the bird engaged in struggle to which Stevens' poem is connected, rather than to the 'lark' 'fixed' in the 'mind' of Kant's transcendental idealism, detached from the 'thing-in-itself' and relegated to the museum of the past.

This poem shows itself to be about something more fundamental than just war, it is about universal 'law', a law that looks very similar to statements made by Heraclitus such as 'war is the father of all and the king of all'.[286] Heraclitus' word for 'war' is *polemos*, which we earlier defined as 'strife' or 'struggle'.[287] The poem certainly extends *polemos* to 'all' by demonstrating that the humans, like the wildlife, are contending, though the humans fail to see the connection. This is the *harmoniē* of the tension between the 'bow and the lyre', and it is now that we can think back to the antithetical forces of the poem that opened Stevens' *Harmonium*, 'Earthy Anecdote'. We can think of that instrument, and the more precise instrument of Stevens' guitar, twanging a wiry string, connecting world and art in the unity of the *fundamental* ground. This is the 'rhapsody' of 'things as they are' which

[284] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 136.
[285] Ibid., p. 136.
[286] Ibid., p. 136.
[287] Mihai I. Spariosu, *God of Many Names – Play, Poetry and Power in Hellenic Thought From Homer to Aristotle*, p. 58.

connects with the posture of the nerves. It is poetic language that opens up the connection in the ontological ground, as the word 'guitar' echoes the ontological sense of 'are' in the repetition of 'things as they are'. The *harmoniē* of a universal *polemos* has replaced the musical 'key' of the order of *technê* found at Key West, as the universal point of connection between the imagination and reality. Patke notes that Picasso had considered that 'Cubist painting was an anticipation of the camouflaged war machines he saw passing through the streets of Paris in 1914.'[288]

In what *way* does Stevens believe that the poet's 'role is to help people live their lives'? The first step it seems is to uncover a more fundamental connection of poetry, society and world, subject to war as the nature of all things. Gregory Fried, in his work entitled *Heidegger's Polemos – From Being to Politics* (2000), suggests that for Heraclitus:

> Opposition is necessary to the cosmos, for without it, the bow is unstrung; things united in the hidden harmony of conflict lose their very definition when that strife ceases.[289]

Fried states further that the word 'all' in Heraclitus' 'war is the father of all and the king of all', is at once a 'social' and an 'ontological' term.[290] He says that: 'I have argued that both levels of meaning can be present in the fragment without the one excluding the other.'[291]

If this marks Stevens' response to his critics for how he can trump socially conscious poets, by suggesting that society itself is reduced to an ontological struggle, then it would render him very close indeed to Heidegger's use of Hölderlin,

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[288] Rajeev S. Patke, *The Long Poems of Wallace Stevens – An Interpretive Study*, p. 79.
[289] Gregory Fried, *Heidegger's Polemos – From Being to Politics*, p. 23.
[290] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 136.
[291] Gregory Fried, *Heidegger's Polemos – From Being to Politics*, p. 28.

who Heidegger believed was 'deeply wedded in spirit to Heraclitus'.[292] Fried notes that:

as Robert Dostal has cogently argued, Heidegger turns to Hölderlin because of Heidegger's very particular understanding of what it takes to forge a Volk, that is a genuine, historically rooted community, rather than the inauthentic, shallow "public" of liberal civil society.[293]

If Stevens really is entertaining the idea that he can 'help people live their lives' by aligning them with a fundamental ontology of struggle, as a higher law than those governed by society, then perhaps this is the ground that Lentricchia's critique fails to conceive of as a universal ontology. Lentricchia makes mention of Stevens' sense of 'reality' as possessing 'some ultimate ontological portent', but does not pursue that ontology in the complete sense in which Stevens' poems present it.[294] Fried notes with reference to fragment 53 ('war is the father of all and the king of all') that:

Heidegger emphasizes that the fragment is not simply a sociological observation and stresses that polemos describes the *ontological manner* in which beings form a world.[295]

Stevens, in no sense, went as far as Martin Heidegger in what is tempting to say is the logical conclusion of a thinking that politicises pre-Socratic thought of this kind. He did, however, present an ontological alignment of art, society and world, and retreated into the shadows, almost as if to allow it to speak for itself: a law of reality with which to answer his critics.

For the post-Kantian philosopher of art, or poet, pre-Socratic poetic ontology can provide the unity required to 'patch' 'a man' through a universal connection in

[292] Ibid., p. 29.
[293] Ibid., p. 29.
[294] Frank Lentricchia, *Modernist Quartet*, p. 137.
[295] Gregory Fried, *Heidegger's Polemos – From Being to Politics*, p. 33.

polemos. In poem XIX of 'Blue Guitar', it is in the single ground of *polemos* that the two warring poles of the 'lion in the lute' (imagination) and the 'lion locked in stone' (nature/reality) are *connected*, and then reduced to himself.[296] For Stevens the 'horde of destructions' and the sense that 'war is the father of all' were part of reality, but this just meant that the 'first idea' of *polemos* was what all things had in common, including poetry as a 'thing-in-itself'. Stevens' 'committed writing' is an effort to point to warring humanity's 'oneness', in the universal *polemos* which connects every element in the 'horde of destructions'. It is because poetry is part of the *polemos* that Stevens feels he can use it to connect with the *polemos* inherent in reality, and 'reduce' that reality to the imagination of 'himself'. As such Stevens feels he can become the 'intelligence' of the warring elements who can re-direct the *totality* of that violence through art.[297]

In view of the apparent ontological ground beneath Stevens' interpretation of Picasso's 'horde of destructions', the title of Stevens' next collection, *Parts of a World* (1942), is perhaps fitting. It is a collection of some of the poems Stevens had written between 1936 and 1941. By the time of its release in 1942, World War II was well under way. Just as Picasso's Cubism was a 'horde of destructions' reminiscent of Heraclitus, so Stevens, the modern poet, seems to be looking back to similar Greek ideas to render his own art, precisely as T.S. Eliot was doing in this period with his 'Four Quartets' (1943).

Through its language and form 'The Latest Freed Man' enacts the freedom felt when aligned with the *polemos* in nature:

> And so the freed man said.
> It was how the sun came shinning into his room:

[296] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 143.
[297] Ibid., p. 143.

To be without a description of to be,
For a moment on rising, at the edge of the bed, to be,
To have the ant of the self changed to an ox
With its organic boomings, to be changed
From a doctor into an ox, before standing up,
To know that the change and that the ox-like struggle
Come from the strength that is the strength of the sun,
Whether it comes directly or from the sun.
It was how he was free. It was how his freedom came.
It was being without description, being an ox.[298]

The 'freed man' is here shown to be reduced to 'the ox-like struggle', which does not appear to refer to his subjective 'animal nature', but rather seems to be symbolic of the *polemos* of all beings struggling within the 'One'. Burnet had said of Heraclitus that 'the "opposite tension" of the opposites' was that which 'constitutes the unity of the One.'[299] Through the opening of poetic language 'the man' is 'freed' into an awareness of the unity of *being* as struggle, that includes the struggle of the sun in its rising. The struggle of the sun is reminiscent of what Stevens referred to in poem XXXI of 'Blue Guitar', as 'the bubbling sun will bubble up'. By simply 'rising' 'the freed man' is aligned with the *polemos* of the sun's own struggle, transforming him from an 'ant' to the larger ontological alignment, which makes him vast in the 'organic boomings' of nature expressed 'without' rational 'description'. Poetry becomes an experiential event of *being*. That he is 'the latest freed man' implies that Stevens will attempt to usher more people across the threshold, thus helping them to 'live their lives' according to an intrinsic 'truth', free of 'doctrine'.

Bloom suggests that Stevens is here 'granted a Nietzschean vision of the sun, not as a strong man, but as a strong man might be.'[300] Certainly Nietzsche was familiar with the concept of *polemos* and one could easily imagine Zarathustra

[298] Wallace Stevens, 'The Latest Freed Man', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 187.
[299] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 143.
[300] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, p. 149.

speaking ‘thus’ to the sun. However, regardless of where Stevens picked up this pre-Socratic concept, this particular thought seems concerned with an alignment rather than with a ‘vision’. It is a ‘connection’, because Stevens’ poem and the sun are all one in the ‘struggle’ of *polemos*. Stevens has become a part of the discordant *harmony*, part of the *polemos*, which is like freedom, strength and change. It could be freedom from some of the ‘dandyism’ of *Harmonium*, as the discordant dirge of *polemos* evokes the world at war.

Certainly Stevens’ sense of liberty is freedom from the doctors who propose a ‘doctrine to this landscape’, like William Carlos Williams perhaps. Jacqueline Vaught-Brogan notes that Stevens had referred to Williams in a letter of 1935 as ‘old Dr Williams’.[301] It is the ‘doctors’ as representative of the human sphere who cover the ‘first idea’ in ‘varnish and dirt’, instead of allowing it to present itself from itself. For Stevens people are unwittingly part of the *polemos* of the sun in just rising from their beds, their place of comfort in their doctrine, and a threshold of the meeting of dreams and reality. For Nancy, the silence of what I would suggest is akin to ‘being without description’ is of a specific kind:

> It is then the silence of all painting, of all music, the silence of the form, of this form that neither signifies nor flatters but that shows: the rhythm or the schema, the line or the cadence. Neither is it therefore the silence that holds back and keeps in reserve, but the silence that lets the strangeness of being occur: its immediate contiguity, right at the wall. The silence does nothing: it exposes everything.[302]

The ‘being’ that Stevens ‘lets’ ‘occur’ discloses itself as a universal harmony of struggle shared by all things, including poetry. As such, it is no surprise that the collection includes a poem entitled ‘Poetry is a Destructive Force’, which violently

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[301] Jacqueline Vaught Brogan, *The Violence Within The Violence Without - Wallace Stevens and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Poetics* (Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press, 2003), p. 18.

[302] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, p. 73.

reduces the poet and his art in the oneness of the universal *polemos*.[303] In 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words' (1940), which Longenbach notes was written a few months before the attack on Pearl Harbor[304], Stevens defined the 'pressure of reality' as 'spiritually violent, it may be said, for everyone alive'.[305] This spiritual violence underpinned both the absence of physical violence and the presence of physical violence for Stevens, and amounted to the essential ground in which friend and enemy meet.[306]

The point of connection between the poem and the world that Stevens seems to have located in *polemos* allows him to connect all things in a poetic language that is presented as part of the ontological 'truth' it describes. 'The Latest Freed Man' continues with:

> It was the importance of the trees outdoors,
> The freshness of the oak-leaves, not so much
> That they were oak-leaves as the way they looked.
> It was everything being more real, himself
> At the centre of reality, seeing it.
> It was everything bulging and blazing and big in itself,
> The blue of the rug, the portrait of Vidal,
> *Qui fait fi des joliesses banales*, the chairs.[307]

Stevens' 'being without description', his sense of allowing the 'first idea' 'to be', extends to the 'trees outdoors', connecting with the world at hand. His use of language and form is enacting what it is describing, which ironically is 'being without description' as the poem becomes an expression of the 'first idea'. The 'freshness of the oak-leaves' implies renewal, change, flux and a fresh way of seeing them in the unity of the 'first idea' that the new *poesis* has achieved by reconnecting

[303] Wallace Stevens, 'Poetry is a Destructive Force', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 178.
[304] James Longenbach, *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*, p. 203.
[305] Wallace Stevens, 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words', *The Necessary Angel, Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 659.
[306] Ibid., p. 659.
[307] Wallace Stevens, 'The Latest Freed Man', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 187.

them in their *being*. It is notable that the way they look is more important than their actual form, as oak-leaves, in a poem collected with another poem entitled 'Oak Leaves Are Hands'. Perhaps here they look like two things connected in 'one'. Stevens' 'being without description' is an *aletheia* (an unveiling), and it is in this sense that it was 'everything being more real', with himself at the axis of *being*, 'At the centre of reality, seeing it.' Reality literally swells around him through the alliteration of 'bulging and blazing and big in itself'. This is not a reduction to the 'first idea' 'itself', as in 'The Snow Man', but rather is a way of 'seeing' physical objects as connected in the 'centre' of the 'first idea', through poetry.

In the final two lines the linguistic collapse is completed as we move from the 'blue of the rug' at high speed, through a rhyme of 'the portrait of Vidal' (Stevens' Paris-based art dealer) with '*Qui fait fi des joliesses banales*', as the rug and portrait seem to be literally swallowed up in the music of that line, before crashing into 'the chairs'. This leaves us uncertain of the separate nature of the 'rug' that started the process, the artwork showing the image of Vidal and the 'chairs'. Art and world are fused in the collapse. Of course, switching into French, which Stevens believed to be the *other half* of the English language, collapses the two languages into oneness. Vidal is here remembered for despising banal prettiness. Heraclitus had expressed 'delight in the mire', and Stevens *may* be recalling such a conception as a means of including dirty reality in complete *being*.[308] Such a Heraclitean notion would be in keeping with Stevens question in the same collection of poems, as to whether it is 'a philosopher's honeymoon' that one finds 'on the dump'.[309] It is through the opening of a new *poesis* that Stevens experiences a 'bulging' universe,

[308] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 137.
[309] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man on the Dump', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 186.

connected in the ‘struggle’ that initially gave way to this crescendo. The evocation of *being* is expressed through constant references to art, which is consciously performed in order to attach art to the single underlying principle of ‘truth’. The effect is to blur the lines of fiction and reality and of subjective and objective, consuming the social sphere into a single ontological ground, of which the ‘freed’ Stevens is a gatekeeper.

In 'The Glass of Water', also collected in *Parts*, Stevens overtly addresses ‘the metaphysical’:

> That the glass would melt in heat,
> That the water would freeze in cold,
> Shows that this object is merely a state,
> One of many, between two poles. So,
> In the metaphysical, there are these poles.[310]

At first glance, poetically, this seems rather a blank statement, with the assonance of ‘heat’ and ‘state’ and ‘cold’ and ‘poles’. However, Stevens’ double use of ‘would’ could stretch to ‘wood’, and this type of enlargement of the principle is borne out by ‘state’ equally serving as a U.S. State, and ‘poles’ for the North and South poles. The language selected has the effect of universalizing the seemingly localized principle. Within this enlargement, ontologically speaking, multiplicity is also ‘merely a state’ in the sense of a way of *being*. We recall that Heraclitus had written: ‘The one is made up of all things, and all things issue from the one.'[311] He had also written that: ‘Men do not know how what is at variance agrees with itself. It is an attunement of opposite tensions, like that of the bow and the lyre.’[312] The ‘poles’ of the ‘metaphysical’ are the source of the *polemos*, but what Stevens has done is to begin

[310] Wallace Stevens, ‘The Glass of Water’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 181.
[311] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 137.
[312] Ibid., p. 136.

with an arbitrary object to demonstrate its universal nature as what he will now suggest applies equally to the 'social' and political sphere.

Just as with Heraclitus' fragment 53, Stevens applies the precise metaphysics to the 'indigènes' (the social level). As such the context is extended and shown to be a part of fundamental nature (the ontological level) that erupts in the masculine conception of war:

> But in the centre of our lives, this time, this day,
> It is a state, this spring among the politicians
> Playing cards. In a village of the indigenes,
> One would have still to discover.[313]

The 'politicians' who trivially play 'cards', together with the earlier reference to the 'poles' in 'the metaphysical', would suggest that Stevens understands 'politics' to be a form of *polemos*, 'in the centre of our lives'. Stevens' recorded in his *Adagia* that: 'Politics is the struggle for existence.'[314]

A large number of 'indigènes' (Algerians, Tunisians and Moroccan 'Goumiers') were enrolled in the French First Army of the Free French Forces, formed to liberate France after the Nazi occupation. The army had been recruited in Africa in French colonies outside the control of the Vichy regime.[315] Of the 200,000 men conscripted, 130,000 were 'indigènes' (natives). For Stevens, the 'indigènes' 'have still to discover' because they, as 'parts' are about to be absorbed into the 'oneness' of another nation, France. The law of *polemos* is the same for them as it is for the glass of water, or the imaginative conception of light that descends as 'a lion' (symbolic of the *polemos* between the 'imagination' and 'reality'), and so they, like the glass are reduced to the single ontological principle, which is inferred to be their

[313] Wallace Stevens, 'The Glass of Water', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 182.
[314] Wallace Stevens, 'Adagia', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 902.
[315] Marshal de Lattre de Tassigny, *The History of the French First Army*, trans. by, Malcolm Barnes (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1952), p. 28.

point of unity. The connection between World War II, ‘politics’, an imagined lion and a glass of water is found in the oneness of *polemos*. Poetry claims the right to a truth-telling function by virtue of its connection to the ontological sense of 'things as they are'.

Beverly Maeder seems somewhat hasty to pitch her statement that 'In order to be interesting "modernist" writing needs to situate itself in opposition to the dominant understanding of language as a picture of mind-world', specifically as a departure from *concepts* that are originally philosophical.[316] By considering that Stevens' statements of equivalence serve 'to join facts that are different in nature' as a means of *not* delimiting characteristics (as by the reduction of two things to the concept of *being*), Maeder negates Heraclitus' *concept* of the One and the many struggling in the same moment.[317] The result is to take Heraclitean concepts and attribute them to modernist language. The effort does not escape ontology, it merely moves from a Parmenidean philosophy of oneness, to a Heraclitean ontology of difference ('the one is made up of all things' etc).

The series of experiments, of theories, that Stevens has been embarking upon as a means of validating the role of the poet in his duty of ontological connection, to carve a *Volk* that know what ‘they’ are, in the sense in which Fried suggests Heidegger had used Hölderlin, would seem to be realised in ‘Of Modern Poetry’. It reads as Stevens’ full sense of the appropriate action of the poet standing in a world defined by *polemos*:

> The poem of the mind in the act of finding
> What will suffice. It has not always had
> To find: the scene was set; it repeated what

[316] Beverly Maeder, *Wallace Stevens’ Experimental Language: The Lion in the Lute* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), p. 93.
[317] Ibid., pp. 93 – 94.

Was in the script.
Then the theatre was changed
To something else. Its past was a souvenir.

It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
It has to face the men of the time and to meet
The women of the time. It has to think about war
And it has to find what will suffice. It has
To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage
And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
With meditation, speak words that in the ear,
In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound
Of which, an invisible audience listens,
Not to the play, but to itself, expressed
In an emotion as of two people, as of two
Emotions becoming one. The actor is
A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives
Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly
Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
Beyond which it has no will to rise.
It must
Be the finding of a satisfaction, and may
Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman
Combing. The poem of the act of the mind.[318]

This is Stevens' poem of what 'modern poetry' is. It is 'The poem of the mind' (aligned with the 'first idea') in the (theatrical/artistic) 'act' of 'finding' satisfaction for all minds as being part of violent reality. Through the 'act' of 'play' Stevens can content all minds that they are parts of the reality of *polemos*, at which point they will become one. This finding of 'What will suffice' was not necessary for the romantics who had 'repeated' what was 'in the script', presumably a script inherited from Classicism. However for Stevens' modern era the theatre changed to a

[318] Wallace Stevens, 'Of Modern Poetry', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 218 - 219.

'theatre of war' as Helen Vought-Brogan has observed.[319] Stevens' 'theatre of war' is universal, 'spiritual', incorporating both mind and world. It is on this stage that the poem must be a part of reality ('It has to be living') walking among the people, much like a reinvented form of Stevens' singer from 'The Idea of Order at Key West', wandering among the 'theatrical distances' as the personified 'first idea' at the axis of mind and world. This poetry is trying to be consciously 'social' in the sense that it has to 'face' 'the men of the time' and 'meet' 'The women of the time'. This 'poem of the mind' has to 'think about war', about *polemos*, and find 'what will suffice' in order to awaken all minds to the fact that they are all part of a single violent reality.

The poem has to 'construct a new stage', which will be the 'place' where the imagination and reality are welded together through the use of an ontologically grounded art that uses 'play' to achieve a connection. The new poems themselves must 'be on that stage', 'like an actor' containing the 'first idea', consciously 'playing' a role in society. This 'actor' is 'insatiable' for the contentment of the mind, of the minds of the audience, but not with a fulfilment of peace and 'order', rather with an acceptance that they are parts of the reality of 'war'. The poem must speak with meditation as 'The Idea of Order' had spoken in performing its own marriage of the imagination and reality in *technê*. Stevens' 'modern poetry' has to speak the unity of the imagination and reality in *polemos* to the 'delicatest ear of the mind'.

In *The Necessary Angel* Stevens explains how 'the poem of the mind' as an expression of this 'violence', helps 'people to live their lives':

It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last

[319] Jacqueline Vaught Brogan, *The Violence Within The Violence Without - Wallace Stevens and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Poetics*, p. 31.

analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives.[320]

'Of Modern Poetry' is the 'sound' and 'expression' of the imagination and reality connected in a universal *polemos* ('violence from within'/'violence without'), and it is a mind embedded in that *connection* that can press back against the 'pressure' associated with the violent fact of war. Stevens' expression of *polemos* attempts to allow the inner ear to accept that humanity is part of a single 'spiritually violent' 'reality', and like Gerard Manley-Hopkins, it must 'repeat' exactly what the equally insatiable audience 'wants to hear', which is a change of focus from repeating 'what was in the script'. It is only the recognition that the *polemos* in the imagination is the same *polemos* found in reality, which allows people to press back against the external pressure. It is through the act of making poetry grounded in the 'first idea' that the poet demonstrates this connection and can fulfil his sense of helping us 'to live our lives'.

Stevens' words of *polemos* allow the 'invisible audience' to hear themselves, to listen to their own nature of *polemos*, importantly 'expressed' through Stevens' use of 'play' (in the musical and ontological sense) in an 'emotion', a mutual empathy of 'becoming one'. The inference suggests that people and things are fundamentally united, if only in mutual *polemos*. This is the 'reality' Stevens wants us to accept that we are part of, just as the reality of world war is part of it. Stevens had said in *The Necessary Angel* that: 'The defeat or triumph of Hitler are parts of a war-like whole'.[321]

[320] Wallace Stevens, 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words', *The Necessary Angel, Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 665.
[321] Ibid., p. 656.

Stevens appears to have been working out this reconciliation of the self with reality in renewed 'social' terms from 'Owl's Clover' and 'Blue Guitar'. As with fragment 53, the 'modern poetry' Stevens proposes is at once 'social' and 'ontological', though as with the *eidos* its proposal is offered as an unveiling of what is merely intrinsic. Stevens remains withdrawn in the shadows still and it is 'the poem of the mind' that is presented as 'the actor', controlled by 'the metaphysician in the dark' who 'plays' the audience into that 'reality'. Heraclitus was widely known to have been called 'Heraclitus the Dark' (due to his obscure statements) and we can see that it is the idea of a sense of detachment that this allows that might appeal to Stevens, precisely as Steven Dedalus describes it[322]:

> The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.[323]

In view of the metaphysical twang of this wiry string Heraclitus had said: 'The hidden attunement is better than the open.'[324] Stevens is acutely conscious of the relationship of the 'poet' with his audience where here he is not present, but is allowing the metaphysics of the poem to speak themselves as an unveiling devoid of a conscious poet. Stevens remains above, manipulating the strings with care to 'create' the right sounds.

What is key is that the 'metaphysician' plays the 'blue guitar', 'twanging a wiry string' which denotes the precision of this instrument over the harmonium of his earlier work. The twang of the string 'gives' to this audience 'Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses', metaphysical 'sounds' that 'wholly' contain 'the mind'

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[322] W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Volume I – The Earlier Presocratics and the Pythagoreans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 405.
[323] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 233.
[324] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 136.

in a total collapse of the 'Copernican Revolution', from which the mind 'cannot descend' into a mythical underworld and from which it has 'no will to rise', to seek for heaven or perhaps the transcendental idealist perspective. Stevens has apparently found a meeting point of mind and world in *polemos*. This 'meeting point' suggests in what way the pre-Socratics are useful to post-Kantian philosopher's of art, and to poets themselves, in reconnecting the mind with the violent nature of the 'thing-in-itself'. For Stevens, a thought that looks similar to Heraclitus' philosophy may have provided a means of creating an answer for his socially minded critics, and reveals how Stevens felt a poet could 'help people to live their lives'.

As Fried had suggested, fragment 53 operates a 'social' and an 'ontological' ground at once. Where would such a pre-Socratic *reduction* of people and nature as one in 'war' lead politically? It is easy to reference anecdotal evidence, such as when Heidegger praised 'Nazi martyr' Albert Schlageter for his 'hardness of will and clarity of heart', attributing the latter to 'the Alemannic countryside' and 'the autumn sun of the Black Forest.'[325] I would argue in closing that 'Of Modern Poetry' is suggesting that the 'modern poetry' (having totally confronted the nature of *polemos*) should *play out* the reality of *polemos* in the 'everyday' as an act of neutralizing it. Through an enactment of the *becoming* of everyday beings, 'skating', 'dancing' and 'Combing', acts performed by men and women as Stevens says, the poet can 'play' out *polemos* in art in a way that may be considered as a socially engaging act of the poet which neutralizes the need for masculine warfare, if not the reality of violence. The problem, as we shall see in a later chapter, is that this still has the effect of violently reducing *individuals* to oneness.

[325] Jeff Collins, *Heidegger and the Nazis* (Cambridge: Totem Books, 2000), pp. 24 - 25.

A Pre-Socratic Sense of *Being* as the Universal 'Thing-in-Itself'

'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' – A Fiction to Neutralize *Polemos*

In 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', published in context of America's entry into the second world war, Stevens returns to the 'fat girl' who first appeared in 'Anatomy of Monotony'. We will deal with the earlier sections of the 'Notes' in due course, but here, at the end, we find a reappraisal of the 'fat girl' 'who' is earth for Stevens. Poem X of 'It Must Give Pleasure' says:

> Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night,
> How is it I find you in difference, see you there
> In a moving contour, a change not quite completed?
>
> You are familiar yet an aberration.
> Civil, madam, I am, but underneath
> A tree, this unprovoked sensation requires
>
> That I should name you flatly, waste no words,
> Check your evasions, hold you to yourself.
> Even so when I think of you as strong or tired,
>
> Bent over work, anxious, content, alone,
> You remain the more than natural figure. You
> Become the soft-footed phantom, the irrational
>
> Distortion, however fragrant, however dear.
> That's it: the more than rational distortion,
> The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that.
>
> They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.
> We shall return at twilight from the lecture
> Pleased that the irrational is rational,
>
> Until flicked by feeling, in a gildered street,
> I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.
> You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.[326]

In the period in which Stevens was composing the 'Notes' he wrote to Hi Simons that: 'It is simply a question of whether poetry is a thing in itself, or whether it is not.

[326] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 351.

I think it is.'[327] If the poet is to help to neutralize *polemos*, then he 'must' achieve an art that can connect totality in a oneness devoid of the disparate parts that cause the struggle. He wants to 'Check your evasions, hold you to yourself'. However the earth is always revolving, always in a state of *becoming* and what Stevens actually has is an aberration, a world that is always found 'in' the 'difference' that causes the *polemos*. He has not yet achieved the stasis and unity of the 'rock' that will be fully unveiled in 'Credences of Summer'.

In context of speaking of Parmenides' spherical conception of *being*, Heidegger proceeds to elucidate a position comparable to one taken by Rilke:

Yet Rilke himself, on one occasion, speaks of the "globe of being," and does so in a context which touches directly on the interpretation of the statement about the widest orbit. In a letter of January 6, 1923, Rilke writes:

"... like the moon, so life surely has a side that is constantly turned away from us, and that is not its opposite but its completion to perfection, to plenitude, to the real, whole, and full sphere and globe of being."[328]

Rilke's conception of a 'full sphere and globe of being' that includes everything is reminiscent of Parmenides' spherical plenum that includes seeming as well as truth.[329] For Stevens it is the imagination that rises from reality and reveals the fullness of complete *being*, exactly as he had depicted it in poem XVIII of 'Blue Guitar'. [330] In just thinking about the earth 'it' automatically becomes a 'figure' with human characteristics of being 'strong', 'tired', 'anxious', 'content', 'alone'.

For Stevens, earth automatically becomes a 'soft-footed phantom' and shows that part of the character of the earth is the 'irrational distortion', 'the fiction that results from feeling'.[331] This reveals the imagination as rising up and out of the sea

[327] A Letter to Hi Simons, February 18th, 1942. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 403.
[328] Martin Heidegger, 'What Are Poets For?', *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 121.
[329] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 182.
[330] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 143.
[331] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 351.

of 'ex', as the unseen half of 'real reality'.[332] The imagination is depicted as rising out of reality for Stevens, because the mind is part of 'reality'. 'That's it: the more than rational distortion,/ The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that.'[333] The 'Sorbonne' will realize that the 'irrational is rational' only when they, like Parmenides' *poesis*, realize that 'the more than rational distortion' is a part of the oneness of 'real reality', something that must be included in truly naming the earth.

As will become critical for Stevens' later vision of the 'rock', it is through a *poesis* that this enlarged sense of reality is reduced to one thing. The process confirms that the irrational must first become 'rational' (at 'twilight', the threshold between dreams and reality), which results in pleasure, from which universal ground it is predicted that we will finally be 'flicked by feeling'. Arguably, to be 'flicked' by the 'feeling' of the enlarged ground of the imagination and the reality foretells of the ecstatic 'transport' of the 'rock' of 'Credences'. The earth can only truly be named when we allow the complete reality of the metaphysical and the physical (imagination and reality) to flick *us* with feeling, rather than determining what it is with our own (detached) subjective minds, that look at the earth and automatically *attribute* a 'soft footed phantom' to *it*. In other words the 'soft footed phantom' must be re-compounded into a sense of 'reality' as a single unit.

The effect of this completion of what will become the 'rock' is to produce a fullness that stops the earth 'revolving', 'except in crystal'. This line raises a section from the *Critique of Judgement* as follows:

A single empirical judgement, as for example, the judgement of one who perceives a moveable drop of water in a rock-crystal, rightly looks to everyone finding the fact

[332] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 143.
[333] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 351.

as stated, since the judgement has been formed according to the universal conditions of the determinant judgement under the laws of a possible experience generally.[334]

In contradistinction to Kant's 'radical subjectivization of the aesthetic', Stevens seems to be suggesting that a 'singular judgement' *for everyone* is possible, in 'reality', if we accept that the 'irrational distortion' is itself part of the enlarged reality, that allows that the work of art has a truth-telling function.[335] In this regard Kant's *sensus communis* can be curiously verbalised: 'I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo./ You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.'[336]

The earth can be named, fluently, as part of Stevens' earthly language of the 'mundo'. It will stop evading the mind, unified in a sense that neutralizes *polemos*. It will only revolve in the beauty of poetry, in 'rock-crystal' that has become a '*stanza my stone*'.[337] 'Everyone else' will find it the same because the universal connection of *being* will be complete. Only then will the *polemos* between individual beings be swallowed up in the ontological oneness of the language of the 'rock'. Poetic language has become the 'place' where the universal 'thing-in-itself' comes to fulfilment, where it can be felt, seen and heard. Only a poetic language that is fulfilled by both the physical and the metaphysical can qualify as the language of the 'rock'.

The final poem of the 'Notes' further reiterates the constant need for the unification of mind and world for the mollifying of the *polemos*:

> Soldier, there is a war between the mind
> And sky, between thought and day and night. It is
> For that the poet is always in the sun,
>
> Patches the moon together in his room

[334] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, LLC, 2009), p. 41.
[335] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 84.
[336] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 351.
[337] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man on the Dump', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 186.

To his Virgilian cadences, up down,
Up down. It is a war that never ends.[338]

It is through the act of making poetry, to the rhythm of his 'Virgilian cadences', that the poet places the imagination into the light to demonstrate that it is part of reality and as such refreshes reality as a whole. Threading the mind and sky, thought and day, day and night, sun and moon is the act of the poet continually in connecting the whole in a way that neutralizes the poles of the *polemos* and connects the audience with the universal 'thing-in-itself'. Stevens' images are of a poet tirelessly forging the imagination and reality together and his language is at 'play' with the 'up down,/ Up down' acting to blur the lines of the subjective and the objective, while at once denoting the 'Virgilian cadences' of the act of writing poetry. His 'play' binds the audience into the oneness and his words echo the reductive philosophy of Heraclitus: 'The way up and the way down is one and the same.'[339]

Transport to Summer - An 'Accord' with 'Reality'

'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' was later added to *Transport to Summer* (1947). The collection itself marks the beginning of a new poetic vision that pursues the conclusions reached at the end of the 'Notes'. In a letter of 1951 Stevens called this vision 'the necessity of a final accord with reality'.[340] The harmonious music of this 'accord' will be the artistic ground where the universal 'rock' as a 'thing-in-itself' can come to presence. The French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, in his innovative work on Kant's critical philosophy, states that:

The first thing that the Copernican Revolution teaches us is that it is we who are giving the orders. There is here an inversion of the ancient conception of Wisdom: the sage was defined partly by his own submission, partly by his 'final' accord with

[338] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 351.
[339] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 138.
[340] A Letter to Charles Tomlinson, June 19th, 1951. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 719.

Nature. Kant sets up the crucial image in opposition to wisdom: we are the legislators of Nature.[341]

Stevens' 'final accord' is not an accord that takes place in the subjective self as legislator, rather it is an embracing of the ancient sage-like, poetic 'Wisdom' of a connection in *being* that precedes what is arguably Kant's romantic turn in the *Critique of Judgement*.

What I have previously referred to as Stevens' engagement with *polemos*, as that which characterized his poetry written in context of the rise of fascism and World War II, can now be absorbed in the language of the 'rock'. Stevens' 'new' vision is not concerned with the one and the many, but with the equally acute axis of the point where 'The physical pine' and 'the metaphysical pine' meet in the oneness of a new *poesis*. This vision constitutes a complete 'reality' that fulfils the mind by seeing the visible and the invisible as part of one 'reality'. The development in Stevens' poetry, from at least the period following the 'Notes', is to no longer see individual poems as 'things in themselves', but to view poetry as part of a universal 'thing-in-itself'. This cosmic 'thing-in-itself' includes the imagination and reality, the metaphysical and the physical and it is freed of all Kantian dislocation or 'dis-cord'. As we have seen since 'The Snow Man', the vision is manifest as a particular *way of seeing*. What Stevens will finally reveal in 'Credences of Summer' is a work of art that itself reveals a language of physical and metaphysical 'reality', reduced to a single unity. This revelation through poetic unveiling is completed synonymously with the fulfilment of summer, in contradistinction to the bare principle of winter associated with 'The Snow Man'.

[341] Gilles Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 14.

‘Transport’, in the sense of carrying from one place to another, is a mode of *becoming*, in the sense of moving towards summer. Yet Stevens also uses the word ‘transport’ in its other sense of ‘overwhelmingly strong emotions’.[342] In his *Adagia* Stevens had written that: ‘we never arrive intellectually. But emotionally we arrive constantly (as in poetry, happiness, high mountains, vistas).’[343] This kind of ‘transport’ is not that of physical movement, but is an emotional fulfilment that will be completed in the static peak of summer, as the poet is ‘flicked by feeling’. To be ‘flicked’ by the ‘feeling’ of the physical and the metaphysical combined, produces the language of the ‘rock’ through ‘transport’.

In 'Repetitions of a Young Captain' Stevens appears to elect the mode of the future ‘rock of summer' that will complete the ‘accord with reality’:[344]

> The choice is made. Green is the orator
> Of our passionate height. He wears a tufted green,
> And tosses green for those for whom green speaks.
>
> Secrete us in reality. It is there
> My orator.[345]

‘Green’ is the ‘orator’ of the ‘speech we do not speak’, of ‘our passionate height’, the ecstatic ‘transport’. The language of physical nature is spoken to those ‘whom green speaks’, which suggests that language, nature and humanity are one thing for Stevens. ‘Secrete us in reality’, literally, invest us in the same stuff as the earth. ‘Credences of Summer’ has been presaged throughout this canto and now its objective is outlined:

> Discover
> A civil nakedness in which to be,

[342] Judy Pearsall, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, p. 1524.
[343] Wallace Stevens, ‘Adagia’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 911.
[344] Wallace Stevens, ‘Credences of Summer’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 325.
[345] Wallace Stevens, ‘Repetitions of a Young Captain’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 274.

In which to bear with the exactest force
The precisions of fate, nothing fobbed off, nor changed
In a beau language without a drop of blood.[346]

The lines foresee an encounter with 'reality' in which the attempt to hold on to the static mode of this 'to be', will be attempted. Let it reveal ('Dis-cover') 'nothing fobbed off', nothing 'changed' and let it do so in a beautiful language.[347] Yet underlying the sense of 'Green' as the 'orator' is the metaphysical, which the appearing of 'Green' 'speaks'.

In 'Chocorua to its Neighbor', also collected in *Transport*, Stevens appears to confirm that the 'snow' of 'The Snow Man' was a 'metaphor' for the underlying metaphysical unity of the 'nothing' of *being*:

metaphysical metaphor,
But resting on me, thinking in my snow,
Physical if the eye is quick enough[348]

If one looks at the 'nothing' of *being* as Stevens did in 'The Snow Man', then 'it' can be physical 'if the eye is quick enough'. The 'meta-phor' of 'snow' stood for the 'meta-physical' and it is in that sense that the metaphysical can be physical, because when Stevens wrote 'The Snow Man' language and poetry were 'things in themselves' that Stevens had reduced to the 'nothing that is'. The development with 'Credences' is not to reduce the physical, but to envision the *physical* arising out of the metaphysical, as two halves of the whole of *being*, and to uncover this whole in the language of the 'rock' as a universal 'thing-in-itself'. The language of the 'rock' will not cover the 'first idea' with metaphor, but will be physical reality *unveiled* as that which is grounded in the metaphysical. In other words the physical is the solid

[346] Ibid., p. 274.
[347] Wallace Stevens, 'Credences of Summer', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 322.
[348] Wallace Stevens, 'Chocorua to its Neighbor', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 267.

edge of *being*, the 'nothing that is' as the axis of the 'Nothing that is not there', devoid of metaphor and wholly one.

Bloom suggests that Stevens' desire for 'a final accord with reality' is 'a curious hope for the theorist of *It Must Change.*'[349] There is nothing odd or curious about this wish for an 'accord with reality' against the theory of change or *becoming*. In a journal entry of 1907 Stevens noted that:

> Pliny the younger wrote to Lucretius - "Pass through life unnoticed"; - "do not wish to be known even while living." That seems worth noting. How one wishes one could pass through life unnoticed - unnoticed by Necessity - by Nature, itself![350]

The consuming nature of the 'law' of *becoming* for Stevens had been embodied from the beginning in the suckling rivers of 'Frogs Eat Butterflies' and as the 'monotony' of 'Anatomy of Monotony', which was later added to *Harmonium*.[351] The aging Stevens seems keen to 'Dis-cover' a way to stand in nature and 'bear' the 'precisions of fate', knowing that he cannot accept the consuming sway of the 'first idea' that he had unveiled in 'The Snow Man'.

What Stevens had discovered in the *Harmonium* poem, 'The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws' and developed further in 'How To Live. What To Do' from *Ideas of Order*, was the hard implacable 'rock'. In these poems the 'rock' is a symbol that is acceptable to Stevens. It is a solid ground that is fundamentally 'true' in his terms, and which won't consume him ('away from the muck of the land').[352] On the 'rock', Stevens is 'Joyous and jubilant and sure'.[353] In 'Credences of Summer' Stevens will seek to reduce 'the physical' and 'the metaphysical' to a single 'reality'

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[349] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, p. 244.
[350] From his Journal, after September 23rd, 1907. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 104.
[351] Wallace Stevens, 'Frogs Eat Butterflies. Snakes Eat Frogs. Hogs Eat Snakes. Men Eat Hogs' & 'Anatomy of Monotony', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 62 & 90.
[352] Wallace Stevens, 'How To Live. What To Do', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 103.
[353] Ibid., p. 103.

that absorbs *becoming*. The opening of a new *poesis* produces the ‘candor’ of this ground of the universal ‘rock’.

The 'rock' is no longer Stevens' earlier conception of a literal rock (though it retains its status as a symbol of implacable surety); rather it is reality as a whole. As such Stevens can determine the physical and the metaphysical as a oneness: 'The physical pine’ becomes one with ‘the metaphysical pine.'[354] This unity is achieved through a way of seeing, devoid of attribution and expressed as poetry:

> Let’s see the very thing and nothing else.
> Let’s see it with the hottest fire of sight.
> Burn everything not part of it to ash.[355]

This artistic, purgatory way of seeing is reminiscent of how Müller had described the pre-Socratics in seeing the *archê* of *phusis*, which for Heraclitus was fire. Müller’s assessment was that: 'their eyes had not been dimmed by the dust raised in the wars of words that have been going on since their time for more than two thousand years.'[356] Just as Parmenides had brought his complete philosophic ‘reality’ of the ‘it is’ to stand in poetic language, so Stevens raises his ‘rock’ into the unity of a *poesis*. Poetic language is the ground for Stevens’ ‘rock’ to come to presence, to experience the ‘very thing’ in-itself. This explains how a ‘poem’ could take ‘the place of a mountain’ in Stevens.[357]

From this vantage the poet is able to see the physical sun in its 'first idea', in 'the difficulty of what it is to be':[358]

> Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky
> Without evasion by a single metaphor.

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[354] Wallace Stevens, ‘Credences of Summer’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 322.
[355] Ibid., p. 322.
[356] Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language*, p. 332.
[357] Wallace Stevens, ‘The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 435.
[358] Wallace Stevens, ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 330.

Look at it in its essential barrenness
And say this, this is the center that I seek.[359]

What Charles Altieri calls 'the order of metaphor' is shown to be utterly compounded in the 'essential barrenness'.[360] The 'center' that Stevens is seeking for is the axis of the metaphysical and the physical without the *polemos* or struggle of *becoming*, because the 'rock' is a single universal 'thing-in-itself', realised in poetry. In the structure of Stevens' 'rock' the physical is viewed as that which stands above the metaphysical, as *being* that can be seen:

It is the natural tower of all the world,
The point of survey, green's green apogee,
But a tower more precious than the view beyond,
A point of survey squatting like a throne,
Axis of everything, green's apogee[361]

The here and now of physical reality emerging out of the metaphysical is more precious 'than the view beyond', than mythological projections that really begin and end with the earth. It is an 'accord with reality', a huge sense of reality where visible nature is only half of reality. It is a point of 'survey', a perspective from which to *see* the invisible that is at one with it. 'Green', or physical nature is an 'apogee', a 'tower', a 'throne' that squats as it is compressed with the metaphysical half, secreted into one 'reality'. As we have argued, this 'rock' is the 'Axis of everything' and we should not underestimate Stevens' sincerity in meaning 'everything'. 'Time', or *becoming*, perhaps in context of Stevens' own advancing years, is now addressed with reference to this fixed state of the 'apogee' of summer:

It is the old man standing on the tower,
Who reads no book. His ruddy ancientness

[359] Wallace Stevens, 'Credences of Summer', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 322 - 323.
[360] Charles Altieri, 'Why Stevens Must be Abstract', *Wallace Stevens: the Poetics of Modernism*, ed. by Albert Gelpi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 98.
[361] Wallace Stevens, 'Credences of Summer', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 323.

Abhors the ruddy summer and is appeased,
By an understanding that fulfils his age,
By a feeling capable of nothing more.[362]

Having arrived at the apex of summer, Stevens is determined to exchange ‘transport’ as *becoming* for the emotional ‘transport’ of ecstatic completion. It was as early as ‘Blue Guitar’ that Stevens had suggested that: ‘time grows upon the rock’.[363] When Stevens wrote ‘Blue Guitar’ the ‘rock’ was still that literal, palpable, implacable part of nature, the solidity of planet earth. Here, Time in ‘His’ 'ruddy ancientness', is 'appeased' by this stasis at the ‘Axis of everything’, which at the apex of Summer, is momentarily static. ‘There is nothing left of time’.[364]

The opening of the new *poesis* that absorbs physical reality and metaphysical ‘reality’, ‘fulfils’, or fills full Time’s age. Stevens shares the identity of this ‘Father Time’ figure, ‘feeling capable of nothing more’ and seeking the moment of arrest from time. In other words he wants to resist the *becoming* towards death, to resist 'The precisions of fate' and to slip past ‘Necessity’ unnoticed. Physical reality, again piled high, is the apex of metaphysical reality:

One of the limits of reality
Presents itself in Oley when the hay,
Baked through long days, is piled in mows. It is
A land too ripe for enigmas, too serene.[365]

In context of Stevens’ use of ‘transport’, Kingsley says that Parmenides’ word for ‘travelling’:

is *perân*; and it has very particular connotations. It happens to be related to another word we have encountered already - *peirata*, “bonds” or “limits” - and you can judge its sense accordingly.[366]

[362] Ibid., p. 323.
[363] Wallace Stevens, ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 140.
[364] Wallace Stevens, ‘Credences of Summer’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 322.
[365] Ibid., p. 323.
[366] Peter Kingsley, *Reality*, p. 278.

At the ‘limits of reality’ the land is ‘too ripe’ for any ‘enigmas’ for the mind. The ‘limits of reality’, like *aletheia*, ‘Presents itself’ and fulfils the mind as the poet is ‘flicked by feeling’. The bond of an ontologically grounded *poesis* has captured the two-in-oneness of the physical and the metaphysical. Parmenides had said of the 'it is' that: 'Since, then, it has a furthest limit, it is complete on every side, like the mass of a rounded sphere, equally poised from the centre in every direction.'[367] In the letter of 1945 in which Stevens praises Parmenides, he had specifically noted Calliois' reference to Parmenides as ‘the supreme poet from the point of view of substance’.[368]

The ‘rock’ is now revealed again and it includes both physical nature in *totalis* and its metaphysical underbelly. Physical reality is the showing out of the nothing of metaphysical reality:

> The rock cannot be broken. It is the truth.
> It rises from land and sea and covers them.
> It is the mountain half way green and then,
> The other immeasurable half, such rock
> As placid air becomes. But it is not
>
> A hermit's truth nor symbol in hermitage.
> It is the visible rock, the audible,
> The brilliant mercy of a sure repose,
> On this present ground, the vividest repose,
> Things certain sustaining us in certainty.
>
> It is the rock of summer, the extreme,
> A mountain luminous half-way in bloom
> And then half way in the extremest light
> Of sapphires flashing from the central sky,
> As if twelve princes sat before a king.[369]

[367] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 176.
[368] A Letter to José Rodríguez Feo, April 6th, 1945. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 495.
[369] Wallace Stevens, ‘Credences of Summer’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 324 - 325.

Stevens' opening line, 'The rock cannot be broken. It is the truth', is strongly reminiscent of Parmenides' 'it is', which is described as the 'truth' that is 'uncreated and indestructible'.[370] This 'rock' rises out of sea and land as a literal rock. The 'rock' is the mountain that is half way physical ('the nothing that is') and the other 'immeasurable half', metaphysical, 'such rock/ As placid air becomes' (the 'Nothing that is not there').[371] It is not a truth known only to the obscure hermit, or in obscure symbol, rather it is right before Stevens' eyes, the 'rock', in its *being*, a 'sure repose'. Symbol and metaphor are part of the greater 'reality' of the 'rock'. The 'rock of summer' is the 'extreme' of reality, 'mountainous', yet equally one with the other half which is 'in the extremest light' (a 'candor'), 'flashing from the central sky', which is the point at which the physical and the metaphysical meet. It is the 'sounds' of 'midsummer' singing in 'choirs', which itself remembers the 'summer sound' 'in a summer without end' from the Key West poem.[372] It is the repetition of the sound of summer in favour of the repetition of the seasons wheeling past that produces a 'Pure rhetoric of a language without words', as the *poesis* unveils this new 'rock' of stasis:

> Things stop in that direction and since they stop
> The direction stops and we accept what is
> As good. The utmost must be good and is[373]

The *poesis* of the 'rock' expresses the physical and metaphysical in unison as Stevens experiences completion in the 'thing-in-itself', an 'accord with reality'.

Burnet, who Stevens had read by 1945, suggests of Parmenides' poem that:

To sum up. What *is*, is a finite, spherical, motionless corporeal *plenum*, and there is nothing beyond it. The appearances of multiplicity and motion, empty space and

[370] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, pp. 173 - 174.
[371] Wallace Stevens, 'The Snow Man', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 8.
[372] Wallace Stevens, 'The Idea of Order at Key West', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 105.
[373] Wallace Stevens, 'Credences of Summer', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 324.

time, are illusions. We see from this that the primary substance of which the early cosmologists were in search has now become a sort of "thing in itself." It never quite lost this character again. What appears later as the elements of Empedokles, the so-called "homoeomeries" of Anaxagoras and the atoms of Leukippos and Demokritos, is just the Parmenidean "being." Parmenides is not, as some have said, the "father of idealism"; on the contrary, all materialism depends on his view of reality.[374]

Stevens wrote 'Credences' in 1946, a few months after reading Burnet's assessment that the absolute fullness of Parmenidean 'being', as a 'motionless corporeal plenum', had 'become a sort of "thing in itself".' That this 'thing-in-itself' is 'finite' and static against 'motion', as well as being achieved in a *poesis*, establishes the source as a *possible* line of influence, though we cannot categorically rely upon it. The point of interest is that the direction of Burnet's interpretation of Parmenidean *being* leads out of 'idealism' and into 'materialism', in which the 'metaphysical' becomes 'physical', 'if the eye is quick enough'.[375] What had been folded up in the winter of 'The Snow Man' is here, in 'midsummer', unfolded again from that same 'center'. This direction of thought demonstrates very clearly how Pre-Socratic poetic philosophy, as the 'Wisdom' of a 'final accord' with Nature, was useful for post-Kantian philosophers and poets in attempting to experience the 'thing-in-itself'.

The development of Stevens' poetry from *Harmonium* is perhaps best thought of in context of his development of the 'rock', which changes from an object of implacable surety to a universal ground of complete reality. It is with the emergence of Stevens' universal 'rock' that he can begin to move toward the idea of 'The Whole of Harmonium', a title that he considered for his 1954 *Collected Poems*.[376] As such, poems are no longer individual 'things in themselves', but are

[374] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 182.
[375] Wallace Stevens, 'Chocorua to its Neighbor', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 267.
[376] A Letter to Alfred A. Knopf, April 27th, 1954. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 831.

increasingly seen as part of the universal ‘thing-in-itself’, which is the ‘rock’ of the physical and the metaphysical unveiled in poetic language as an ‘accord’.

The Auroras of Autumn – A Crisis in ‘Accord’ and a Return to Art

The unity of the physical and the metaphysical in the oneness of the opening of a new work of art, produced the 'candor' of ‘accord’ that brings Stevens into dialogue with post-Kantian philosophers of art, such as Heidegger and Gadamer, as we have seen. However, Stevens' jubilation in establishing the static nature of the 'rock' is short lived in 'Credences of Summer'. The seed of doubt that this ecstatic stasis would last seems to come with: 'One day enriches a year', and then, 'Or do the other days enrich the one?/ And is the queen humble as she seems to be'.[377] This is posited in the terms of the many and the one, of the ‘horde of destructions’ reanimated in the river of *becoming*, possibly in context of Heraclitus’ reductive statement that ‘One day is like any other.’[378] This unseen 'queen', who appears to be 'Ananke', may not be serene and 'humble' and may yet determine to reverse the endless repetition of a ‘summer sound’ back to the repetition of the seasons in change.[379]

The dilemma of that irrepressible question concerning the dominance of either static *being* or *becoming*, which I have suggested is linked to Stevens' consciousness of his own advancing years, rolls into the title poem of *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950). Here the question emerges as an acute crisis that opens the collection. When Stevens wrote the poems of *Auroras* he was in his later sixties. The new universal sense of the ‘rock’ reveals itself not to be made of the hard implacable

[377] Wallace Stevens, ‘Credences of Summer’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 324.
[378] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 141.
[379] Wallace Stevens, ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 105.

'rock', but of a universal 'law' of *becoming* reminiscent of Heraclitus. 'Aurora' was the 'goddess' of dawn to the ancient Greeks and this is the dawning of autumn, or the dawning of death for Stevens. Leggett suggests that 'if "Credences" is about stasis, a moment "Beyond which there is nothing left of time," "Auroras" is about flux'.[380] Arguably, it is only with the 'return to art' in forms such as the 'angel of reality', that Stevens re-establishes static *being* as the 'first idea'.[381] The 'angel of reality' appears in the last poem collected in *The Auroras of Autumn*, which we will analyse in greater detail in due course.

For now we can recall that 'Blue Guitar' had related that:

> Deeper within the belly's dark
> Of time, time grows upon the rock.[382]

The 'belly's dark' is reminiscent of the 'belly-sounds' of Stevens' river of *becoming* seen in 'Frogs Eat Butterflies'.[383] 'The Auroras', meaning the 'Northern Lights', appear to be nothing other than a huge serpent, literally consuming the fabric of the 'rock' as reality is given up to arbitrary change:

> This is form gulping after formlessness,
> Skin flashing to wished-for disappearances
> And the serpent body flashing without the skin.[384]

The 'change' of forms is the *aurora borialis* as the 'rock' appears to be consumed within its own nature of *becoming*:

> This is his poison: that we should disbelieve
> Even that. His meditations in the ferns,
> When he moved so slightly to make sure of the sun,
>
> Made us no less sure. We saw in his head,

[380] B.J. Leggett, *Late Stevens – The Final Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), p. 10.
[381] Wallace Stevens, 'Angel Surrounded by Paysans', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 423.
[382] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 140.
[383] Wallace Stevens, 'Frogs Eat Butterflies. Snakes Eat Frogs. Hogs Eat Snakes. Men Eat Hogs', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 62.
[384] Wallace Stevens, 'The Auroras of Autumn', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 355.

Black beaded on the rock, the flecked animal,
The moving grass, the Indian in his glade.[385]

The 'poison' of this snake seems to be that it will make us 'disbelieve' that change will consume us as well, a theme espoused in earlier poems such as 'Anatomy of Monotony'. The difference here is that Stevens' sense of *becoming* is not merely physical, it is the absolute base of all reality, it is ontological. As such the 'nest' of this snake is anywhere and it runs through reality ('The moving grass, the Indian in his glade'), even to the real/natural snake: 'Black beaded on the rock, the flecked animal', as Vendler has noted.[386] The constituents of this 'nature' are all ab-original and the 'flecked' camouflage of the snake (indicating the 'one and the many'), makes it appear to be 'one' with the 'rock'. In Stevens' lexicon, this would seem to indicate that change is consuming the very fabric of reality, a ground that would have to be re-established in the poems of *The Rock* (1954).

The crisis of Stevens' concept of having been secreted into a universal reality of *becoming*, continues in 'This Solitude of Cataracts'. Here a specifically Heraclitean sense of *becoming* is depicted as a destructive force:

He never felt twice the same about the flecked river,
Which kept flowing and never the same way twice, flowing

Through many places, as if it stood still in one,
Fixed like a lake on which the wild ducks fluttered,

Ruffling its common reflections, thought-like Monadnocks.
There seemed to be an apostrophe that was not spoken.

There was so much that was real that was not real at all.
He wanted to feel the same way over and over.

He wanted the river to go on flowing the same way,
To keep on flowing. He wanted to walk beside it,

[385] Ibid., p. 355.
[386] Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings – Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 249.

Under the buttonwoods, beneath a moon nailed fast.
He wanted his heart to stop beating and his mind to rest

In a permanent realization, without any wild ducks
Or mountains that were not mountains, just to know how it
Would be,

Just to know how it would feel, released from destruction,
To be a bronze man breathing under archaic lapis,

Without the oscillations of planetary pass-pass,
Breathing his bronzen breath at the azury centre of time.[387]

Change or *becoming* appears to stand still in 'one,/ Fixed like a lake'.[388] This is a close parallel with Heraclitus' statement that 'it rests by changing'.[389] The fluttering of the 'wild ducks' indicates that nature is on the move again, and the effect is to ruffle the 'common reflections' of the 'thought-like Monadnocks'. The 'common reflections' are Stevens' words and the 'thought-like Monadnocks' (perhaps inverting the idealism of that 'mountain-minded Hoon') are indicative of his poems themselves (as poems 'of the mind'), such as the mountainous 'rock of summer' from 'Credences', that is grounded in the fixed flowing of the ontological river.[390]

Stevens had read Müller's account of Heraclitus on the subject of words in *Lectures on the Science of Language*, which reads as follows:

Heraclitus held that words exist naturally, but he did not confine himself to that technical phraseology. Words, he said, are like the shadows of things, like the pictures of trees and mountains reflected in the river, like our own images when we look into a mirror.[391]

For this thinking, our words, like ourselves are part of nature and that nature is grounded in the river of *becoming*. Echoing Heraclitus precisely, Stevens had said in a letter of 1940 that:

[387] Wallace Stevens, 'This Solitude of Cataracts', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 366.
[388] Ibid., p. 366.
[389] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 139.
[390] Wallace Stevens, 'Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 100.
[391] Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language*, p. 332.

a poem is like a man walking on the bank of a river, whose shadow is reflected in the water. If you explain a poem, you are quite likely to do it either in terms of the man or in terms of the shadow, but you have to explain it in terms of the whole.[392]

The poet, his mind, his words and the mountains of his land are all one for Stevens, and all are subject to the oneness of Heraclitean *becoming*. The emphasis in Stevens' poem certainly seems to be on the poet's words (as part of the 'thing-in-itself') sailing down the river to oblivion, and it seems that we must read the poem by incorporating Stevens in that same flow. What he is presenting is the drama of his connection with the universal 'thing-in-itself' of the 'rock'. It is clear from this drama that pre-Socratic thought raises 'new' difficulties, while proving useful to the poet for reanimating the project of modernism.

The 'Monadnocks' (reminiscent of Stevens' 'mountain' from 'Credences') are grounded in the river of a universal *becoming*. The river, like the serpent of change from the 'Auroras' is 'flecked', showing their synonymous Heraclitean nature, as the one containing the many, or the 'horde of destructions'. Stevens' own poems are swept into the past before his eyes, even the seemingly static 'rock' of 'Credences'. It is significant that Stevens would call his 'thought-like' mountains 'monadnocks', an outcrop of incredibly hard rock that provides a metaphor for the solitude of these cataracts standing against the river of *becoming*. In Ralph Waldo Emerson's long poem, *Monadnock*, it is the rock summit itself that foresees its own collapse despite its efforts to stand against 'the hurts of time'.[393]

For his own part, Stevens doesn't want the flow of change that leads toward death. He wants to 'walk beside' the river, 'beneath a moon nailed fast'. He wants simply 'to be', to know how it 'Would be', just to abide in the eternal ontological

[392] A Letter to Hi Simons, January 18th, 1940. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 354.
[393] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Vol. IX* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1904), p. 68.

connection, which includes the ‘whole’ of the ‘man’ *and* his ‘shadow’. He is seeking a 'permanent realisation' in which his heart can 'stop beating' and his 'mind' can 'rest'. He wants to be 'released from destruction' (from the ‘cataracts’ of declining eyesight), 'To be a bronze man', still 'breathing' 'bronzen breath'. In ‘An Ordinary Evening in New Haven’, a poem from the same collection concerned to remedy the crisis of every successive poem amounting to ‘farewell to an idea’, it was ‘the man/ Of bronze whose mind was made up and who, therefore, died.’[394]

Stevens is approaching seventy years of age in context of this collection. He has engaged wholly with his enlarged sense of ‘reality’, and now he is looking to realign the terms of this engagement that has pressed through Kantian synthesis. He desires the 'planetary pass-pass', reminiscent of the 'Turning' planets of 'Domination of Black', to cease their 'oscillations' and let him 'be' at the 'azury' centre of time. When Stevens wrote 'Domination of Black' it was the poem that *enacted* the *becoming* of the universe. Now his own historical poems are included in that truly universal *becoming* (because poems are part of the ‘thing-in-itself’ for Stevens), as is his own existence.

In 'Credences of Summer' Stevens had attempted to reverse the sense of 'transport' as *becoming* to an ecstatic fulfilment that ‘fulfils’ time’s ‘age’.[395] 'The Auroras' had destroyed that stasis. Stevens' efforts to shift the dynamic of fundamental *becoming* to one of a stasis, which he now overtly calls 'being', continue into 'Metaphor as Degeneration'. He appears to be seeking the implacable 'metaphor' that will not degenerate, like that which he had momentarily dis-covered in the ‘rock’ of ‘Credences’. In doing so, Stevens could be read as showing an affiliation

[394] Wallace Stevens, ‘An Ordinary Evening in New Haven’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 402 - 403.
[395] Wallace Stevens, ‘Credences of Summer’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 323.

with Heidegger's sense of *sein-zum-tod* (*being*-towards-death) or Parmenides' sense of the 'truth' of *being* lying in the 'underworld'. If *being* is to be complete, it must include death:

> If there is a man white as marble
> Sits in a wood, in the greenest part,
> Brooding sounds of the images of death,
>
> So there is a man in black space
> Sits in nothing that we know,
> Brooding sounds of river noises;
>
> And these images, these reverberations,
> And others, make certain how being
> Includes death and the imagination.
>
> The marble man remains himself in space.
> The man in the black wood descends unchanged.
> It is certain that the river
>
> Is not Swatara. The swarthy water
> That flows round the earth and through the skies,
> Twisting among the universal spaces,
>
> Is not Swatara. It is being.
> That is the flock-flecked river, the water,
> The blown sheen – or is it air?
>
> How, then, is metaphor degeneration,
> When Swatara becomes this undulant river
> And the river becomes the landless, waterless ocean?
>
> Here the black violets grow down to its banks
> And the memorial mosses hang their green
> Upon it, as it flows ahead.[396]

'If' is the key initial strain to be heard here. 'If there is a man white as marble' sitting in a wood, contemplating 'the images of death', so there is a man who has already died, 'in black space', 'in nothing that we know', 'Brooding sounds of river noises'. The river is called 'being' and the man is dead. The living man, the 'man white as marble', frets about death, the dead man broods on *being*, as a part of it. If the living

[396] Wallace Stevens, 'Metaphor as Degeneration', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 381.

man can imagine death then the dead man is in *being*, and here *being* is proposed as incorporating both death and the imagination:

> And these images, these reverberations,
> And others, make certain how being
> Includes death and the imagination.[397]

The reference to 'these images' is connected to 'these reverberations', in a mode of 'play' similar to being 'flicked by feeling'. In 'The Creations of Sound', collected in *Transport*, it was the sound of authentic poetry that was 'reverberating' and equally linked to making 'the visible a little hard/ To see', by implying the invisible in the visible.[398] Through the artistic representation of image and sound, *being* comes to representation and it wholly connects mind, world and now death in a oneness for Stevens. However, as the river (which is still in the Heraclitean guise of being 'flock-flecked') 'flows ahead', the inference is confirmed that only with the inclusion of 'death' into the 'rock' will time stop and metaphor cease to be degeneration, as an equally valid part of the totality of the 'it is'.

To prove the strength of the certainty that the dead man will be held, and certainty is what Stevens is searching for, he inverts their prospective positions. The man 'white as marble' is equally himself in space as he is in *being*, the same as the dead man, who now in the 'black woods', denoting death very clearly, 'descends unchanged'. 'Descends' evokes a specifically Greek notion of being led into the underworld and we should make no mistake that it is the dead man that Stevens is extremely concerned about preserving in *being*. Indeed, the whole conception of the unity of life and death is reminiscent of Heraclitus' saying that: 'it is the same thing in us that is quick and dead, awake and asleep, young and old; the former are shifted

[397] Ibid., p. 381.
[398] Wallace Stevens, 'The Creations of Sound', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 274 - 275.

and become the latter, and the latter in turn are shifted and become the former.'[399] It appears to be within the context of a proposition of this kind that Stevens immediately clings to the 'certainty' of the ontological connection by saying, 'it is certain that the river/ Is not Swatara.' If 'the river' is not a real river, the river that runs through east central Pennsylvania, then what is this river that the dead man hears?

> The swarthy water
> That flows round the earth and through the skies,
> Twisting among the universal spaces,
>
> Is not Swatara. It is being.[400]

Stevens' questioning into the nature of *being*, which he clearly sees as the fundamental *archê* that underlies reality, is to ask why metaphor is degeneration when everything is connected to the 'swarthy water' of 'being'? Such a question suggests an ontology of *becoming* that suits Stevens' modernism, but which is at odds with his own existential encounter with death.

That art is the means of conceiving of the 'expressings' of 'being' demonstrates Stevens' wish to elevate the status of art and ground the imagination in an ontological 'truth', reminiscent of Heidegger and Gadamer. Critchley had suggested that Stevens owes his sense 'that "the two-in-oneness" of the world is phenomenologically disclosed or reflectively transfigured as a world *not* in philosophy but through a poetic act, that is to say, in an artwork', to 'romanticism'.[401] However, the romantic connection should not be embraced at the expense of recalling what Stevens did in transforming what he saw as the limitations of the romantic imagination. Stevens says in *The Necessary Angel*:

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[399] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 139.
[400] Wallace Stevens, 'Metaphor as Degeneration', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 381.
[401] Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are – Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, p. 30.

before going on, we must somehow cleanse the imagination of the romantic. We feel, without being particularly intelligent about it, that the imagination as metaphysics will survive logical positivism unscathed. At the same time, we feel, and with the sharpest possible intelligence, that it is not worthy to survive if it is to be identified with the romantic. The imagination is one of the great human powers. The romantic belittles it. The imagination is the liberty of the mind. The romantic is the failure to make use of that liberty.[402]

I would suggest that the poetic philosophy of the pre-Socratics which had proved so useful to Hölderlin, provided post-Kantian poets and philosophers with a model for connecting the imagination and reality in the unity of the work of art.

Having accommodated the crisis of the 'Auroras', Stevens returns to the theme of the appearing of art as the means of uniting the physical and the metaphysical in a way that defuses *polemos*, by establishing the unity of static *being* as the 'first idea'. In the poem that closes the collection, entitled 'Angel Surrounded by Paysans', Stevens says:

One of the countrymen:
There is
A welcome at the door to which no one comes?
The angel:
I am the angel of reality,
Seen for a moment standing in the door.

I have neither ashen wing nor wear of ore
And live without a tepid aureole,

Or stars that follow me, not to attend,
But, of my being and its knowing, part.

I am one of you and being one of you
Is being and knowing what I am and know.

Yet I am the necessary angel of earth,
Since, in my sight, you see the earth again,

Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set,
And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone

[402] Wallace Stevens, 'Imagination of Value', *The Necessary Angel, Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 727 - 728.

Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings,
Like watery words awash; like meanings said

By repetitions of half-meanings. Am I not,
Myself, only half of a figure of a sort,

A figure half seen, or seen for a moment, a man
Of the mind, an apparition apparelled in

Apparels of such lightest look that a turn
Of my shoulder and quickly, too quickly, I am gone?[403]

The poem, through the mouth of '*One of the Countrymen*', begins with a line containing the blank ontological statement, 'There is', which 'is' itself like a 'welcome' at a 'door to which no one comes?' Or do they, because in the moment of putting *being* into question, '*The angel*' appears. The language of the poem is predominantly expressed by the 'angel', who is an angel *of* reality, not a religious 'angel'. The 'angel' is 'one of you', which in the next chapter I will suggest is a criteria for 'major man' aligned with the 'first idea', wherein 'being one of you/ Is being and knowing what I am and know'. This angel is 'necessary', performing a practical function for the 'social' (peasants) sphere, allowing people to see the 'first idea' again through an art that literally dresses the 'first idea' in the apparel of the imagination. Just as with the 'song' at Key West, it is from 'beyond the genius of the sea', through the hearing of this 'angelic' necessity, that you can hear the 'tragic drone' of 'watery words awash', as the unfolding of 'reality' from that centre, dis-closes the centre in language. Adorno had critiqued such an annulment of the rational in the ontological thought associated with Heidegger, suggesting that Heidegger: 'discarded the rational moment which Husserl preserved'.[404]

[403] Wallace Stevens, 'Angel Surrounded by Paysans', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 423.
[404] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E.B. Ashton (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 2007), p. 70. Much has been written on Stevens and Edmund Husserl, notably, Paul Kenneth Naylor. '"The Idea of It": Wallace Stevens and Edmund Husserl'. *The*

Heidegger would seem to bear out an ontological interpretation of this poem through an assessment of Rilke's reference to the being called the 'Angel':

This being, in Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, is the Angel. This name is once again a basic word in Rilke's poetry. Like "the Open," "the draft," "the parting," "Nature," it is a basic word because what is said in it thinks the whole of beings by way of Being. In his letter of November 13, 1925 Rilke writes:

"The Angel of the *Elegies* is that creature in whom the transmutation of the visible into the invisible, which we achieve, seems already accomplished. The Angel of the *Elegies* is that being who assures the recognition of a higher order of reality in the invisible." [405]

This directly correlates with Stevens' 'angel' and perhaps we would better say that it is in the 'sight' of *being* within art that we see Stevens, see the 'reduction of metaphysics'.

The poem was inspired by a Pierre Tal-Coat painting that Stevens had purchased and therefore is conceived as a poetic evocation of a work of art. Just as Stevens had advocated that we should look at the world as we would look at a 'picture', cleared of its 'varnish and dirt' ('man-locked set'), so this art work stands as a universal ontological principle which stretches the ground between reality and the imagination. The painting itself shows a Venetian glass bowl surrounded by several smaller terrines, glasses and bottles, as Riddel has noted.[406] The smaller objects orbiting the larger is composite to the parallel of Picasso's 'horde of destructions', or the model of the 'flecked' objects as part of the pixilated whole.

This parallel can be extended when we note a letter from Stevens to the art dealer Paule Vidal from 1949, on the subject of the Tal-Coat painting:

Wallace Stevens Journal 12.1 (Spring 1988): 44-45, Thomas J. Hines, *The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens - Phenomenological Parallels with Husserl and Heidegger* (New Jersey & London: Associated University Presses, 1976) and Charles Altieri's essay entitled 'Stevens and the Crisis of European Philosophy', *Wallace Stevens Across the Atlantic*, pp. 61 - 78.

[405] Martin Heidegger, 'What Are Poets For?', *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 131.

[406] Joseph N. Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens*, p. 234.

Now that I have had the new picture at home for a few days, it seems almost domesticated. Tal Coat is supposed to be a man of violence but one soon becomes accustomed to the present picture. I have even given it a title of my own: *Angel Surrounded By Peasants*. The angel is the Venetian glass bowl on the left with the little spray of leaves in it. The peasants are the terrines, bottles and the glasses that surround it. This title alone tames it as a lump of sugar might tame a lion.[407]

This poem is set where the 'peasants' are and the peasants are entreated to see through the 'sight' of the 'necessary angel of earth'. This has the effect of taming the 'violence' of the Tal-Coat painting, symbolised by Stevens' 'lion'. Just as Stevens was looking to play out *polemos* in 'a man skating' in 'Of Modern Poetry', or just as he would read 'Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the / tulips among them' in 'Large Red Man Reading', also collected in *The Auroras*, so too here, he is defusing the *polemos* of the 'lion' by playing out the violence of fundamental reality at the root of 'social' existence, through a work of art that connects to the unity of *being*.

Art is the ground in which the 'rock' comes to appearance, just as for Parmenides it was through a *poesis* that the *plenum* of the 'it is' was fulfilled. In this model the 'angel' spans the ground between the physical 'rock' and the 'placid air' half of the 'rock', 'such rock/ As placid air becomes.'[408] Costello suggests that 'Angel Surrounded by Paysans' also 'explores a presence/absence dynamic undoubtedly drawn from Tal Coat's mixtures of solid and transparent surface.'[409] For the post-Kantian philosopher of art or poet, the oneness of this conception that parallels pre-Socratic notions, has the effect of nullifying *polemos* and it is through the work of art that this representation of the philosophical is most accurately rendered. Stevens is in complete accord with the dynamics of this 'perspective'.

[407] A Letter to Paule Vidal, October 5th, 1949. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, pp. 649 - 650.
[408] Wallace Stevens, 'Credences of Summer', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 324.
[409] Bonnie Costello, 'Stevens and Painting', *The Cambridge Companion To Wallace Stevens*, p. 178.

The Rock and Final Lyrics - Recomposing out of the 'Rock'

'The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain', collected in *The Rock*, arguably looks back on the mountain that appeared in 'Credences', as Bloom has noted[410]:

> There it was, word for word,
> The poem that took the place of a mountain.
>
> He breathed its oxygen,
> Even when the book lay turned in the dust of his table.
>
> It reminded him how he had needed
> A place to go to in his own direction,
>
> How he had recomposed the pines,
> Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds,
>
> For the outlook that would be right,
> Where he would be complete in an unexplained completion:
>
> The exact rock where his inexactness
> Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had
> edged,
>
> Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,
> Recognize his unique and solitary home.[411]

Stevens' secreting of the mind in 'reality' is complete and content with the advent of this poem. His 'final accord with reality' was successful and here he is seen to be re-composing out of the universal 'rock' unveiled in the earlier poem, 'Credences of Summer'. His language of *phusei* is now the language of the 'rock', a reality from which Stevens can proceed to compose more realities that are still part of the 'rock'. However, if we look at the language of the poem we can see how that 'rock' (which includes the poem as part of the 'thing-in-itself'), is realised through art. Stevens recalls how he had unveiled 'the rock of summer':

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[410] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, p. 249.
[411] Wallace Stevens, 'The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 435.

How he had recomposed the pines,
Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds,

For the outlook that would be right[412]

He is operating here much as an artist operates and Costello associates the poem with the subject matter of Cézanne.[413] The re-composition of the pines was the realisation of 'The physical pine' as connected to 'the metaphysical pine'.[414] Stevens 'shifted the rocks' which rose above land and sea in canto VI of 'Credences'.[415] He 'picked his way among the clouds' when he traced 'the gold sun about the whitened sky' in canto II.[416] The outlook that would be right was achieved atop the tower, that was more important than its perspective and the unexplained completeness is the 'transport' of the 'rock', fully realised.[417] Stevens is here painting a remembrance of his earlier composing of reality. 'The exact rock' is the 'axis' between the metaphysical and the physical that fulfils the 'inexactness' of his own mind, by discovering the universal ground in which mind and world are one. It is a way of seeing, a 'view' toward which he had 'edged', much as he had been secreted in reality at the 'Axis of everything'. His connection with the 'thing-in-itself' is a 'gazing' where he can 'Re-cognize' his being at home in the universe.

As the poem, 'Credences of Summer', 'took the place of a mountain' through its '*stanza my stone*' or language of *phusei*, so 'The Planet on the Table' appears to be Stevens' collected works sitting on the table next to him, as Bloom has noted.[418] Stevens' poems are a 'rhetoric of a language without words', they are a pure expression of the 'rock', with 'nothing fobbed off', with 'everything not part of it'

[412] Ibid., p. 435.
[413] Bonnie Costello, 'Stevens and Painting', *The Cambridge Companion To Wallace Stevens*, p. 170.
[414] Wallace Stevens, 'Credences of Summer', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 322.
[415] Ibid., pp. 324 - 325.
[416] Ibid., p. 322.
[417] Ibid., p. 323.
[418] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, p. 365.

burnt 'to ash'. Stevens doesn't mind if the poems should survive or not, but it is important that they be capable of bearing: ‘Some lineament or character,/ Some affluence, if only half-perceived’, ‘Of the planet of which they were part’.[419] Heraclitus had said: ‘It is wise to hearken, not to me, but to my Word and to confess that all things are one.’[420] The use of the word 'lineament' combines its geological sense with its sense of features, usually of a face. This is made more certain by the additional use of the word 'character', which combines the root word meaning to engrave and the sense of the printed letter or word, with the human sense of the character of a person. Stevens has ingeniously collapsed the earth, the poem and the sense of the human into the oneness of his 'rock', from which it is implied he can carve a new sense of ‘man’. Here the ‘unity’ is expressed as:

> His self and the sun were one
> And his poems, although makings of his self,
> Were no less makings of the sun.[421]

The Kantian mind that orders the world has passed. Stevens is 'one' with the 'sun'. The modern poet has completed the 'horde of destructions' and can paint a new reality from that palette, as 'makings of his self' that are also 'makings of the sun'. He is making it new, painting from a ground of the total connection of mind and world, which owes much to the pre-Socratic ontology.

In the poem called 'The Rock', Stevens would work through the implications of his 'final accord with reality'. Here the physical half of the 'rock' ('blooming and the musk') is grounded in 'being, that gross universe'.[422] A language of binding describes how the physical reality surrounds the ‘gross universe’ of 'being’. Physical

[419] Wallace Stevens, ‘The Planet on the Table’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 450.
[420] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 132.
[421] Wallace Stevens, ‘The Planet on the Table’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 450.
[422] Wallace Stevens, ‘The Rock’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 445.

reality that includes language had always been presented as the 'crust'[423], the 'shed' snake 'skin'[424] that encircle the 'first idea' as the 'centre':

> The pearled chaplet of spring,
> The magnum wreath of summer, time's autumn snood,
>
> Its copy of the sun, these cover the rock.[425]

The 'rock' collapses the distance of the 'Copernican Revolution' and 'point A' is 'near' point 'B':

> The rock is the habitation of the whole,
> Its strength and measure, that which is near, point A
> In a perspective that begins again
>
> At B: The origin of the mango's rind.[426]

Heraclitus had said that: 'In the circumference of a circle the beginning and end are common.'[427] Phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard has said in a phrase reminiscent of Parmenides' spherical 'plenum' of *being* (in Heideggerian guise) that: '*Das Dasein ist rund*. Being is round'.[428] Stevens says:

> The rock is the gray particular of man's life,
> The stone from which he rises, up-and-ho,
> The step to the bleaker depths of his descents...[429]

Lee M. Jenkins has suggested that Stevens' point of reference for these lines may be Heraclitus. Jenkins says that: 'Stevens may have in mind the Heraclitean dictum that the way up is also the way down'.[430] The thinking, which mirrors pre-Socratic thought, is useful to the post-Kantian philosopher of art for secreting humanity in a reality of connection, realized through poetry.

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[423] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 150.
[424] Wallace Stevens, 'Farewell to Florida', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 97.
[425] Wallace Stevens, 'The Rock', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 446.
[426] Ibid., p. 447.
[427] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 138.
[428] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 239.
[429] Wallace Stevens, 'The Rock', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 447.
[430] Lee M. Jenkins, *Wallace Stevens: rage for Order* (Brighton & Portland: Sussex University Press, 2000), p. 119.

The poem that closes *The Rock* is entitled 'Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself'. Stevens is clearly confident of his ability to present the 'thing-in-itself', having completely overcome Kant:

> At the earliest ending of winter,
> In March, a scrawny cry from outside
> Seemed like a sound in his mind.
>
> He knew that he heard it,
> A bird's cry, at daylight or before,
> In the early March wind.
>
> The sun was rising at six,
> No longer a battered panache above snow...
> It would have been outside.
>
> It was not from the vast ventriloquism
> Of sleep's faded papier-mâché...
> The sun was coming from outside.
>
> That scrawny cry - it was
> A chorister whose c preceded the choir.
> It was part of the colossal sun,
>
> Surrounded by its choral rings,
> Still far away. It was like
> A new knowledge of reality.[431]

The language of the poem serves to collapse the distance of 'point A' from 'B'. The separation between objective and subjective is collapsed as the 'bird's cry' is neither 'in the mind' or 'outside'. Parmenides had said that:

The thing that can be thought and that for the sake of which the thought exists is the same; for you cannot find thought without something that is, as to which it is uttered.[432]

Kingsley observes of Parmenides' statement that:

[431] Wallace Stevens, 'Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 451 - 452.
[432] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 176.

reality consists of nothing apart from existence and what thinks or perceives it, there is no longer any question of inner or outer. Whatever we consider outside us is really inside, and anything we view as internal is right out there.[433]

In the *Auroras* poem, 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven', Stevens had said that a philosopher seeks 'an interior made exterior' and a poet 'the same exterior made/ Interior'.[434] For Parmenides and Stevens, a *poesis* is the single ground in which 'outside' and 'inside' meet.

In like manner, past and future are collapsed into an eternal 'now'. It is 'at daylight', 'or before'. It is 'the earliest ending of winter'. 'The sun was rising at six'. The language is indecisive and the moment is displaced in the single unity of the 'rock'. Every seemingly different premise is really just a single expression of the homogenous 'rock' that has no past and no future. The separation between all individual objects is also collapsed in oneness as the bird's cry is equally 'part of the colossal sun'. 'Battered panache' is a phrase like 'early ending' that seeks to marry contrasting extremes in oneness. 'Panache' can also mean a 'plume of feathers' worn in a helmet or cap.[435] Thus the earlier 'battered panache' of the sun also links the 'scrawny cry' of the bird to the sun.

However, Stevens' collapse of all individual things into oneness is being painted out of the 'rock', which includes the de-creations of his 'Planet on the Table'. The sun and the bird have become fused together in the language of the poem ('battered panache'), which raises the 'panache upon panache' of the 'parakeet of parakeets' from the *Harmonium* poem, 'The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws'.[436]

[433] Peter Kingsley, *Reality*, p. 181.
[434] Wallace Stevens, 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 410.
[435] Judy Pearsall, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, p. 1028.
[436] Wallace Stevens, 'The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 65.

In that early poem the bird exists 'in the sun pallor of his rock'.[437] Stevens' total reduction includes the collapse of his 'early' poetry into his 'later' poetry. For Stevens it seems, as for Parmenides, there is only the eternal 'now' of the 'it is'.[438] Equally, the phrase 'choral rings' serves to conflate sound, future echoes, matter and the fire of the 'colossal sun', in a spherical sense that we have already seen identified with Parmenides' conception of reality as bound within a single plenum. The 'choral rings' represent the ontological 'song' that comes from 'beyond the genius of the sea'[439], as a remembrance of the 'coral and coraline sea', 'in the ever-freshened Keys' heard at Key West.[440] The 'c preceded the choir' is a textual link to 'The Comedian as the Letter C', a letter of the alphabet that Stevens had always found amusing for its sound, which abundantly repeated here, adds another connection to 'sea'. The term 'preceded' also suggests that the earlier poem 'seeded' the later in advance, just as a *poesis* is 'seeded' from *being*. The poem is a re-composition of the fabric of the 'rock', in an effort to destroy the ground between the 'ideas about the thing' and 'the thing itself', through total immanence.

The 'bird's cry' is not part of a false dream, rendered through the constructed falsehoods of 'ventriloquism' and 'papier-mâché'. Rather it is the stark, utterly impersonal 'thing-in-itself' of complete 'reality', crying of 'itself' at the same time as listening to 'itself', as Stevens' late lyrics such as 'The Course of a Particular' will depict it:

> In the absence of fantasia, without meaning more
> Than they are in the final finding of the ear, in the thing
> Itself, until, at last, the cry concerns no one at all.[441]

[437] Ibid., p. 65.
[438] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 175.
[439] Wallace Stevens, 'The Idea of Order at Key West', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 105.
[440] Wallace Stevens, 'Farewell to Florida', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 97.
[441] Wallace Stevens, 'The Course of a Particular', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 460.

Stevens is capable of listening to the universal 'thing-in-itself' as 'it is', as part of it, without the 'varnish and dirt' of any human attribution. The bird that cries and the poet who listens are no different. They are the 'thing-in-itself' come full circle (with everything) into one 'thing', having purged the rational human concepts of 'truth', which themselves simply become more 'rock'. In 'Not Ideas About the Thing', the cry of the totalized 'thing-in-itself' comes 'from outside', yet, 'Seemed like a sound in his mind'. The same conception of the cry and the hearer of the cry being equal 'parts' in the one 'rock' is evident in this universal 'thing-in-itself', just as Burnet had said of Parmenides' sense of *being*.

The bird's cry is equally 'part of the colossal sun', a sun which is 'Still far away'. Here we may offer the parallel with the Parmenidean collapse of distance. Parmenides had said: 'Look steadfastly with thy mind at things though afar as if they were at hand. Thou canst not cut off what is from holding fast to what is'.[442] The 'new knowledge of reality' is very like the Parmenidean poetic collapse of this distance through *being*, a collapse that brings Stevens' 'earlier' poetry into his 'later'. However, we cannot say this is definitively a Parmenidean philosophical position. It could equally be linked to non-perspectival painting. The relationship of 'near' and 'far' is of course a key aspect of modernism and the connection of subject and object is a central theme of romanticism. What I have attempted to demonstrate is how the pre-Socratics accommodate the dynamics of this kind of thought, often in a sense that demonstrates that they were direct sources of influence, as with Heidegger, Gadamer, Schelling and Hölderlin. It would seem, however, that what post-Kantian philosophers and poets wanted from pre-Socratism was primarily the

[442] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 173.

power of its language of reconnection and perpetual renewal, in a context of poetry as ‘truth’.

The last poem collected together in Stevens’ late lyrics is simply called 'Of Mere Being'. Stevens had used the phrase 'mere being’ in a letter of 1943 that described Miami beach at a time when it was still ‘an isolated spot'.[443] Florida, much like Matthew Arnold's Dover, seems to denote a threshold for Stevens at the periphery of certainty. The 'palm' that rises into view would appear to be at a cross roads, at an axis:

> The palm at the end of the mind,
> Beyond the last thought, rises
> In the bronze decor,
>
> A gold-feathered bird
> Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
> Without human feeling, a foreign song.
>
> You know then that it is not the reason
> That makes us happy or unhappy.
> The bird sings. Its feathers shine.
>
> The palm stands on the edge of space.
> The wind moves slowly in the branches.
> The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.[444]

At 'the end of the mind' and 'Beyond the last thought' does not signal transcendence, but rather death. The 'distance' is 'bronze' because bronze in the lexicon of ‘An Ordinary Evening’ signalled the dead man held by 'being'.[445] This is why Bloom calls 'Of Mere Being' 'the great death poem'[446], which would be the end of it if Stevens had not already told us that 'being' includes both ‘death and the

[443] A Letter to Samuel French Morse, May 27th, 1943. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 449.
[444] Wallace Stevens, ‘Of Mere Being’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 476 - 477.
[445] Wallace Stevens, ‘An Ordinary Evening in New Haven’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 366.
[446] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, p. 343.

imagination'.[447] Stevens' palm is here the completed 'rock', the 'rock' that includes all things, even death.

In this analogy, the palm signifies physical reality and the bird in it is the metaphysical 'reality'. However, in Stevens' terms it is not a symbol or a metaphor that can degenerate, because death and destruction are already part of 'it', and the language of which it is composed is part of the universal 'thing-in-itself' compounded with the 'first idea'. This precious bird parallels the bird seen in 'The Bird With the Coppery, Keen Claws', as Bloom has said.[448] It is a 'gold feathered bird' here just as in the earlier poem it was expressed as a bird 'Of his gold ether, golden alguazil.'[449] The temporal proximity of the 'earlier' poem again forms part of Stevens' 'rock' and a collapse of time is certainly a trait of modern literature. This 'reality' of connection is expressed through 'song', and the bird sings a 'foreign song' that is 'Without human feeling', 'without human meaning'. It is the expressing of 'being', like the Parmenidean sense of *being* that is a universal 'thing-in-itself', the 'rock'. The intimation is that there is no 'reason', in the sense of cause, and in the sense of ratiocination. These two things are not the cause of happiness or misery, which here are two in one.

'The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down' and appear to look exactly the same as the branches of the palm. 'The physical pine' is one with the 'metaphysical pine'.[450] The poem's blank statements of 'is' take us right back to the 'pine' of 'In the Carolinas' where the connection of physical and metaphysical seems to have first been unveiled in a *poesis*. The difference here, at the end, is that Stevens has universalised the form, a total inclusiveness that has incorporated an acceptance of

[447] Wallace Stevens, 'Metaphor as Degeneration', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 381.
[448] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, p. 343.
[449] Wallace Stevens, 'The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 65.
[450] Wallace Stevens, 'Credences of Summer', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 322.

the poet's own impending death. Leggett questions: 'If pure being is beyond the last thought...then how is it possible to depict it, to provide an image for it, as the poem attempts to do?'[451] As we have seen, one answer to Leggett's not unreasonable question is that thought has become the 'rock'. These images are not just symbols or metaphors, but are part of the 'syllables' of the 'rock', as a language of *phusei*. Ziarek notes that: 'the title phrase never occurs in the poem itself, as though it were intended to be articulated aside from the words of the poem.'[452] Visible and invisible are two in one, not 'pure being' in the sense of just a 'nothing', but 'mere being' in the sense of everything as the totality of 'it is'. As Stevens declares in his 'Note on Moonlight' (perhaps remembering Burnet's interpretation of Parmenides rather than Bishop Berkeley): 'It is as if being was to be observed'.[453]

This rather Yeatsean bird has 'fire-fangled feathers' perhaps because, as Eleanor Cook has observed, it is envisioned as a phoenix.[454] In 'The Bird With the Coppery, Keen Claws', it would 'flare' 'in the sun-pallor of his rock.'[455] It holds similarities with Heraclitus' sense that the world was animated by an ever-living fire with measures perpetually igniting and going out.[456] The idea may be to keep the fire of *being* burning in one's poems, even when dead. The palm after all is another evergreen, like the pine. In 1926 Rilke, two weeks before he died, recorded in his notebook a final poem entitled 'Death':

> as I in my spirit burned, see, I now burn in thee:
> the wood that long resisted the advancing flames
> which thou kept flaring, I now am nourishing

[451] B.J. Leggett, *Late Stevens – The Final Fiction*, p. 141.
[452] Krzystof Ziarek, 'Stevens, Heidegger and the Foreignness of Poetry', *Wallace Stevens Across the Atlantic*, p. 82.
[453] Wallace Stevens, 'Note on Moonlight', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 449.
[454] Eleanor Cook, *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 312.
[455] Wallace Stevens, 'The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 65.
[456] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 134.

and burn in thee.

My gentle and mild being through thy ruthless fury
has turned into raging hell that is not from here.[457]

Stevens' connection of the metaphysical bird of flame with the physical palm is deepened in a further observation by Cook:

The implicit pun is on the word "phoenix," which is what this fiery bird is. The Greek word for this fabulous bird is also used for a date-palm. The bird "sings in the palm" and through a pun is the palm. So also the poem is contained in its words or its leaves, and vice versa; it also *is* its words or leaves. So also space is contained in the mind, and vice versa; it also *is* in the mind.[458]

Stevens' pun would seem to imply that physical and metaphysical reality are one, and that this reality includes the mind as we have already evidenced with reference to Parmenides.

Altieri seems correct to suggest that Stevens' poems 'concentrate attention upon the basic ontological property of the *as*', such as with Stevens' constant use of the phrase, 'as if', that appears to expand the perceptual experience of a thing through ever flowering metaphor.[459] However, Stevens' intense perceptions that produce 'the order of metaphor' are not simply a technical, modernist means of expanding the 'rock', as Altieri has also argued.[460] Stevens says that 'one does not progress through metaphor', and that 'reality is the indispensible element of each metaphor'.[461] In Stevens' later period the multiplicity of metaphor only establishes the 'oneness' of the 'rock', according to the extant *concept* that directs his art in uncovering a totality that he *already* believes in. The 'act' of making poetry does not

[457] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Selected Poems* (New York: Routledge, 1986), p. 223.
[458] Eleanor Cook, *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens*, p. 312.
[459] Charles Altieri, 'Why Stevens Must be Abstract', *Wallace Stevens: the Poetics of Modernism*, p. 107.
[460] Ibid., p. 98.
[461] Wallace Stevens, 'From the Notebooks', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 921.

construct the 'rock', but rather uncovers, unveils, and rubs the 'varnish and dirt' off of art *and* reality in order to *see* the totality of the static 'first idea' (that was already there), as clearly as possible.[462] In other words, multiple metaphors are not an 'act' of creating 'a thing' or 'a poem'. Rather, they are the illusory movements ('up down/Up down') in the surface of the 'rock' that confirm its extant oneness, the clear view of which satisfies belief.[463] As Stevens says in 'The Rock', the appearing of things real or imagined is 'like a blindness cleaned' through the 'candor' ('bright sight') of 'a birth of sight'.[464]

The development in 'Of Mere Being' from 'The Bird With the Coppery, Keen Claws' has been to come to *see* the conflation of the bird and the rock, and to allow this universalized vision to 'flick' the reduced poet with 'feeling', and produce the language of the 'rock' from the 'transport' of the 'rock'. So complete is Stevens' vision of the 'rock', that the 'earlier' poetry is 'one' with the 'later'. If the circus animals have gone then Stevens is still artistically rendering out of the immediacy of his 'earlier' poetry, as if his entire output were one poem, as part of the one 'rock'. Parmenides had written of the 'it is' that: 'Thus is becoming extinguished and passing away not to be heard of'.[465] Kingsley suggests that here Parmenides establishes the cosmic order 'at the only possible moment it ever can be: right now.'[466] Stevens' encounter with his early poetry is not a looking back, rather it is a confirmation that he, like everything, has not moved at all. He is still composing out of the 'first idea' that is (and always was) a universal 'thing-in-itself'. The rest, in terms of multiplicity and movement, is all illusion.

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[462] A Letter to Henry Church, October 28th, 1942. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, pp. 426 - 427.
[463] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 351.
[464] Wallace Stevens, 'The Rock', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 445.
[465] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 175.
[466] Peter Kingsley, *Reality*, p. 168.

As a death poem engaging the 'bronze distance', 'Of Mere Being' is reminiscent of an 'underworld' encounter, at the crossroads between the earth and death. Kingsley argues that Parmenides' sense of the 'underworld', where the 'truth' (*aletheia*) was revealed to him through a *poesis*, was 'the supreme place of paradox where all the opposites meet.'[467] Life and death, reality and the imagination, physical and metaphysical, all meet in this 'place' of final accord. Stevens is conceptually at the cross roads. Parmenides' 'journey' which went nowhere except to the heart of a realisation of a single, united reality, was not about dying, it was about dying before you die. It was about realising that death is a part of complete reality. As such Parmenides in his mythical poem was received 'kindly' in the 'underworld', which denotes he was not there to die, but to return, like a phoenix or an evergreen.[468]

The mythical journey mirrors that of other Greek fables concerning 'heroes' who, in the stories, journeyed into the 'underworld' and returned, such as Heracles and Orpheus. Yet Stevens' model is closer to Parmenides' philosophical rendering that finds the 'truth' of *being* in Tartarus: 'To die before you die, no longer to live on the surface of yourself: this is what Parmenides is pointing to'.[469] It is the 'place' of the 'extremest light/ Of sapphires flashing from the central sky'.[470] For the ancient Greeks the stars in the night sky reflected the fires of the 'underworld', because it was the place where all oppositions and multiplicities were unified. What is key is that Parmenides attempted that connection through poetic language and in that sense Stevens has a very close affinity with such a figure.

For the post-Kantian philosopher or poet, such pre-Socratic poetry provides a sense of the unveiling of a full connection with physical and metaphysical 'reality',

[467] Peter Kingsley, *In The Dark Places of Wisdom*, p. 68.
[468] Ibid., p. 63.
[469] Ibid., p. 65.
[470] Wallace Stevens, 'Credences of Summer', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 325.

which the 'Copernican Revolution' had arguably drained from experience. For Stevens the expression of poetry unites the physical and the metaphysical in a single bond by bathing all things in the renewed ‘candor’ of the ‘first idea’. Art becomes 'truth' for this thinking because it suggests that everything is a fiction made 'true' by its founding in *being*, because *being* is the only truth. Rajeev Patke believes with regard to Stevens that:

> It does not seem then a question of the *Ding an sich* as beyond human reach; rather, the *Ding an sich* itself seems a fiction, a conscious and necessary fabrication which we believe in provisionally and for a purpose.[471]

For the late Stevens, *individual* things in themselves are fictions, including language, poems and metaphor. What remains is the static ‘oneness’ of the ‘rock’ of *being* that, according to Burnet’s interpretation of Parmenides’ sense of *being*, is the universal ‘thing-in-itself’ in which all change is illusory, unreal. In a very late poem written near the end of his life, Stevens describes himself as ‘a disbeliever in reality’ who is leaving:

> With something I could touch, touch every way.
>
> And yet nothing has been changed except what is
> Unreal, as if nothing had been changed at all.[472]

What is ‘true’ is the eternal ‘it is’, the ‘rock’ of *being*, and what has had meaning for Stevens is the renewal of the ‘oneness’ of the ‘rock’ through the creation of endless fictions.

[471] Rajeev S. Patke, *The Long Poems of Wallace Stevens – An Interpretive Study*, p. 131.
[472] Wallace Stevens, ‘As You Leave the Room’, *Opus Posthumous*, p. 118.

Chapter Two

‘Major Man’ and the ‘Supreme Fiction’: The Transvaluation of Religion with Poetry

To review our progress to this point, we began by demonstrating how Gadamer suggests an audience experiences and understands a work of art, through an analysis of the ‘play’ of art. In this analysis we saw how Stevens, at ‘play’, was able to draw his audience into the ontological ground of his poetry, at least in Gadamer’s terms. It was through this analysis that we could demonstrate how Stevens could be read, particularly in view of the comparable nature of pre-Socratic thought with Gadamer’s hermeneutical ‘experience’. We have subsequently pursued a chronological approach to reading the experience of the ‘thing-in-itself’ in Stevens’ poetry, having demonstrated why the pre-Socratic philosophy is useful for the post-Kantian philosopher of art, or poet.

This analysis has led us through romantic points of connection with pre-Socratic thought, as well as via modern examples, demonstrating how Stevens has affiliation with both the romantic and the modern projects, or at least with the epoch which opened up after Kant. In this affiliation, we can perceive a sense of an indebted departure from romanticism, while still utilizing art as the medium of ‘truth’, toward the re-creative energies and post-theological possibilities of what is called modernism. It is this latter, ‘modern’ approach that accounts for the detached role of the poet, the consciousness of the poetry concerning the reader reading, the determination of the poetry to enact what it is advocating, the emphasis on metaphysical conceptions, and the refusal to acknowledge the poetry itself as a ‘work of art’.

Beauty, artistic reference, symbol and a precise use of metaphor may be what one first encounters in reading Stevens. However, the full relevance of this is only grasped in context of the ontological concept that lies beneath, a concept that makes the outer beauty itself 'philosophical' in Gadamer's terms. It is the conceptual presence of this central ground in advance of all 'meaning' that drives the shape of Stevens' poetry. Stevens likes his philosophy 'smothered in beauty', but there was an uncompromising agenda of connection behind the innocence of that 'play' from the beginning. Throughout the analysis, the theme of 'destruction' and recreation by manipulating the perceived ontological base of reality has been evident.[473] We have seen how Stevens' efforts to balance 'reality' moved from the physical to the metaphysical; from the metaphysical to the physical; and finally into the 'accord' of the union of the two in the 'it is' of the 'rock'.

In view of this background we will move into an analysis of the relationship of (what might be called) Stevens' poetry of *being* with religious forms. Having pursued a chronological analysis in chapter one, chapter two will move into a thematic analysis. This analysis will remain conscious of chronological development wherever possible, but will be led by a cross-reading according to themes, in order to ensure that a complete picture of this aspect of Stevens' poetry comes into view.

Modern Poetry and Religion

'That hugest banality of literary modernism' is how Lentricchia refers to the idea that poetry is a substitute for religion.[474] If an important characteristic of Modernity is what Bowie calls 'the growing divorce of individuals' subjective

[473] Paul A. Bové, *Destructive Poetics - Heidegger and Modern American Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 184.
[474] Frank Lentricchia, *Modernist Quartet*, p. 161.

experience of the world from the way the objective world is explained in science', then arguably that 'divorce' is also comparable to a general sense of detachment from the communal religious forms of the preceding age.[475] If this statement is considered to be in any way accurate, then there is a dual implication in it for the role of art in a post-theological world. Firstly, as Bowie suggests, there is a problem of engagement: 'How could the individuality of a non-theologically based art ever gain collective public significance?'[476] Schelling had considered the precise problem:

> The holy, he argues, is constituted at the level of the community, not in the individual: 'A nation which has nothing holy...cannot have true tragedy', thereby establishing the terms of the debate over the possibility of tragedy in the modern world. The problem for modern art is that the collectively binding status of Greek tragedy as a norm for the community could not be achieved by an individual artist.[477]

If the hallmark of modern society is an increasing individualism that defies the necessary community required for the creation of an art of public significance, then how is the individual artist to achieve a work that is 'collectively binding'?:

> What, then, does the artist who sees his or her task in terms of the need for a new mythology do in the meanwhile, in a society which seems to be moving further and further away from the integration sought in that mythology? This was precisely Hölderlin's problem, which suggests how intense the problem can become for the modern artist.[478]

In his *Adagia* Stevens remarks on the project of replacing religion with aesthetics as follows: 'Its present state is the result of the difficulty of establishing it except in the individual mind.'[479]

Secondly there is the problem of fulfilling the same intrinsic needs that the religious forms had in some sense fulfilled. How could art, specifically poetry, fill

[475] Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche*, p. 128.
[476] Ibid., p. 126.
[477] Ibid., p. 126.
[478] Ibid., p. 126.
[479] Wallace Stevens, 'Adagia', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 906.

the hole left by the collapse of religious belief on its own? This problem has been felt by thinkers and poets who have come after Schelling. Bowie suggests:

> Interestingly, many subsequent thinkers, like Heidegger and Adorno, come back, in the light of the decline in theology, to the idea that art is the locus of kinds of self-understanding which are not accessible to the sciences. In this respect one of the vital aspects of modern thought is precisely the way in which needs previously catered for by theology can be catered for by forms like the aesthetic.[480]

This, as Critchley says, is also characteristic of poetry written 'in the wake of romanticism', 'animated by the belief that poetry should take on to itself the existential burden of religious belief without the guarantee of religious belief.'[481]

In our first chapter we outlined Gadamer's efforts to assign an intrinsic truth-telling function to the work of art. If art has the power to unveil the 'truth' of *being*, from itself, the world at hand and in its audience, then perhaps that unifying 'truth' would be an attractive substitute for the 'truth' of religion? In a move away from the transcendental function that Kant had ascribed to aesthetics, Gadamer had suggested that: 'Must we not also acknowledge that the work of art possesses truth?'[482] From what we have evidenced in chapter one, such a position would seem reminiscent of Stevens' efforts to allow a *poesis* to be a revealing of 'being' and 'mere being' to be final 'truth'. However, Bowie remains sceptical as to the extent that art can reveal 'truth':

> One of the dangers in the traditions leading from Hegel to Heidegger and Adorno has been a tendency to over-essentialise accounts of art and philosophy. This is particularly the case if a strong, exclusive connection is made between art and truth, so that, as in Heidegger, only art which is inseparable from its grounding context discloses being in an essential way'.[483]

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[480] Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche*, p. 138.
[481] Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are – Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, p. 20.
[482] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 37.
[483] Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche*, p. 321.

If there is a 'tendency to over-essetialise accounts of art and philosophy', particularly in Heidegger, then Stevens increasingly appears to be a part of that tradition.

Stevens' theological environment in the poetry of *Harmonium* looks distinctly post-Nietzschean, as a world drained of a theology of the transcendent: 'Not as a god, but as a god might be'.[484] B.J. Leggett, who has written extensively on Stevens with regard to Nietzsche, references an unpublished letter of 1943 that suggests that Stevens had read *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, *The Genealogy of Morals*, *The Case of Wagner* and *The Dawn of Day* when he was 'a young man'.[485] Stevens' reading of Nietzsche, by his own account, began again in 1943 and by 1944 he could say in correspondence to Henry Church, that he had 'found a complete set of Nietzsche at the [Hartford] Theological Seminary'.[486]

Critics such as David R. Jarraway have observed that the poetry of *Harmonium* attempts to resolve the conflict between immanence and transcendence, and that 'Sunday Morning' demonstrates 'that a too-worldly poetry might have its shortcomings too'.[487] For the early Stevens, art, an art that rises out of life, is the appropriate consolation in a world where 'Death is the mother of beauty'.[488] In his undated *Adagia* Stevens says: 'It is possible to establish aesthetics in the individual mind as immeasurably a greater thing than religion.'[489] From this perspective, aesthetics becomes a saving power in face of an apparent nihilism. Jarraway highlights that in a journal entry of 1902, Stevens recorded the following: 'the true religious force in the world is not the church but the world itself: the mysterious

[484] Wallace Stevens, 'Sunday Morning', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 56.
[485] B.J. Leggett, *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext*, p. 36. Leggett sourced the letter from the unpublished letters of Wallace Stevens retained at the Huntington Library.
[486] A Letter to Henry Church, March 10th, 1944. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 461.
[487] David R. Jarraway, 'Stevens and Belief', *The Cambridge Companion To Wallace Stevens*, p. 195.
[488] Wallace Stevens, 'Sunday Morning', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 55.
[489] Wallace Stevens, Adagia', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 906.

callings of Nature and our responses'.[490] 'The quail' of 'Sunday Morning' 'Whistle about us their spontaneous cries'.[491] The 'boisterous' chanting of the ring of men resounds in the 'echoing hills' 'returning to the sky'.[492] The 'casual flocks of pigeons' had made 'ambiguous undulations' as they sank 'Downward to darkness, on extended wings'.[493] It is tempting to conclude that 'the mysterious callings of Nature' correlates with the 'ambiguous undulations' of these birds that are going down to death, 'unsponsored'.[494] This would suggest that the power circuitry of 'flux' is approximate to Stevens' sense of 'the world itself' being 'the true religious force'.

Gadamer, thinking of Friedrich Schlegel, suggests how the power circuitry of 'self-renewing' can be separated from what he views as nature 'without purpose and intention'. 'Play' is the key concept for Gadamer because he believes it reconstructs our *being* anew, which obviously appeals to modernism while perhaps also absorbing the 'death' element in nature:

> But most important the being of the work of art is connected with the medial sense of play (Spiel: also, game and drama). Inasmuch as nature is without purpose and intention, just as it is without exertion, it is a constantly self-renewing play, and can therefore appear as a model for art. Thus Friedrich Schlegel writes, "All the sacred games of art are only remote imitations of the infinite play of the world, the eternally self-creating work of art."[495]

The romantic connection is important, as Gadamer and Heidegger's sense of 'truth' embedded in the work of art has strong romantic, as well as pre-Socratic overtones, though 'the eternally self-creating work of art' would appeal to what is called modernism. Stevens' sense of immanence contains the ontological unity that

[490] From his Journal, August 10th, 1902. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 58.
[491] Wallace Stevens, 'Sunday Morning', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 56.
[492] Ibid., p. 56.
[493] Ibid., p. 56.
[494] Ibid., p. 56.
[495] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 105.

attempts to reconnect *individuals* to 'the true religious force' in nature's undulations. Hillis Miller has suggested that the interface between subject and object is central to Stevens, and that this interchange could lead to a "mystical marriage".[496] This is poetry in its most universal and inclusive form. According to this thinking, humanity and poetry are part of Nature's 'mysterious callings'.

As we saw in the preceding chapter, Stevens' 'belief' is in a constant inconstancy that was only finally 'fulfilled' at the point of death. Jarraway notes that Stevens had suggested of 'Notes' that: "the essence of poetry is change," and the essence of change is not that it provides stable truths but rather "that it gives pleasure".[497] It is this pleasure, as Jarraway unravels, that can answer the dissatisfaction found in a purely physical reality that only ends in death: 'And shall the earth/ Seem all of paradise that we shall know?' [498] Bowie provides an account of how Nietzsche's sense of nihilism arguably arises:

> Nihilism for Nietzsche, in contrast, is inextricably linked to the history of philosophy since Plato: 'The need for a *metaphysical world* is the consequence of being unable to derive any *meaning* any *what for*? from the world at hand. "Consequently", it was decided, "this world can only be *apparent*"'. 'Psychological nihilism' is a result of three factors in modernity. The first is the failure to find any teleological meaning in existence, such as a movement towards a moral world order, so that 'becoming' ceases to have a goal and is just arbitrary change; the second is the realisation that there is no unity in the multiplicity of existence which would enable one to believe in one's own value as part of something greater; the third is the loss of the belief in a supersensuous world, which is accompanied by the realisation that one cannot bear this world without that other world. Nihilism is therefore a *result* of metaphysical beliefs which have turned out to be illusory.[499]

There is no world beyond the here and now of 'reality' for Stevens. The physical and the metaphysical are reduced in the 'candor' of a new *poesis*, as in the days *before*

[496] Harold Bloom, ed., 'J. Hillis Miller On The Eloquence of the Poem's Mental Fiction', *Wallace Stevens - Bloom's Major Poets* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), p. 27.
[497] David R. Jarraway, 'Stevens and Belief', *The Cambridge Companion To Wallace Stevens*, p. 199.
[498] Wallace Stevens, 'Sunday Morning', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 54.
[499] Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche*, p. 291.

Plato. The poem provides an opening in which the unity of the imagination and reality is purported to be 'seen'.

For Stevens, 'arbitrary change' or *becoming* that is linked to aesthetics can give an 'order' to existence which results in pleasure rather than nihilism. In a poem entitled 'The Pleasures of Merely Circulating', collected in *Ideas of Order*, it is the 'angel' that is reduced to *becoming*, as a 'religious' icon:

> The garden flew round with the angel,
> The angel flew round with the clouds,
> And the clouds flew round and the clouds flew round
> And the clouds flew round with the clouds.[500]

Nancy, a philosopher concerned with art and ontological thought, suggests that:

> No doubt a religion of art always risks fastening a sacred respect on the "work" there where one should only look to (look at) its operation, which is to say also its *technique*. The technicity of art dislodges art from its "poetic" assurance, if one understands by that the production of a revelation, or art conceived as a *phusis* unveiled in its truth.[501]

A 'reduction of metaphysics' approximate with the 'thing-in-itself', expressed in poetry, is what Stevens seems to consider a suitable replacement for the religious. Jarraway seems entirely correct to argue that:

> It is thus interesting to speculate that the programme that Stevens sets out for himself in his second volume, *Ideas of Order*, was one of immanent transcendence, a synthesis of both physical and metaphysical experience.[502]

The effort seems to be directed at restoring an apparent 'supersensuous world', which, if only another fiction, withholds nihilism and promotes pleasure. This would appear to be an example of a move from what Critchley refers to as the move from *metaphysica specialis* to *metaphysica generalis*, or the 'transcendental turn in

[500] Wallace Stevens, 'The Pleasures of Merely Circulating', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 120.
[501] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, p. 37.
[502] David R. Jarraway, 'Stevens and Belief', *The Cambridge Companion To Wallace Stevens*, p. 195.

philosophy'.[503] However, as we have already seen, the turn away from *metaphysica specialis* plays out in Stevens as a turn toward a 'reduction of metaphysics' to *being* and *becoming* as forces of a 'natural' religious sense. Adorno suggests that: 'Heidegger's transcendence is an absolutized immanence, obdurate against its own immanent character'.[504] The 'angel', the 'garden' and the 'clouds' are all subject to 'merely circulating', as all things for Stevens, real or imagined, are subject to 'mere being'. Stevens' poetry enacts this reduction on the grounds of a fundamental reductive 'truth' expressed through the aesthetic.

In changing the 'ground' of 'truth' from divine revelation to *being* at hand, Stevens is only left with the drained religious forms of the past. Gadamer suggests that:

> It should be admitted that, say, an ancient image of the gods that was not displayed in a temple as a work of art in order to give aesthetic, reflective pleasure, and is now on show in a museum, retains, even as it stands before us today, the world of religious experience from which it came; the important consequence is that its world still belongs to ours. What embraces both is the hermeneutic universe.[505]

It is in a similar sense that Stevens' reduction of the religious form of the angel to *becoming* is embraced as a modern form. It is embraced in a sense of oneness that has dialogue with the universality of Gadamer's 'hermeneutic universe'.

It is an ontologically grounded art that forms Stevens' alternative order to the order of religion, a 'necessary angel of earth'.[506] Seeing the invisible in the visible would appear to be one sense in how Stevens proposes to 'fill' the hole where religion once stood. Gadamer considers that: 'The inseparability of visible appearance and invisible significance, this "coincidence" of two spheres, underlies

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[503] Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are – Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, pp. 36 - 37.
[504] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 106 - 107.
[505] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. xxviii.
[506] Wallace Stevens, 'Angel Surrounded by Paysans', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 423.

all forms of religious worship. It is easy to see how the term came to be extended to the aesthetic sphere.'[507] It is because the 'angel' that appears among the peasants in 'Angel Surrounded by Paysans' is curiously, 'one of you', that it aspires to fulfil the additional criteria of how the increasingly individualist members of a modern society could form the community that can experience the communal myth through art.[508] Nancy suggests that:

> In every vision of something, the vision first of all sees itself as pure vision, seeing nothing, seeing nothing there – and yet, it is already "vision," and as such is ahead of itself or outside itself, not a figure and the figure of nothing – this surprising figure without figure that the event of Being traces in a flash.[509]

'A turn/ Of my shoulder and quickly, too quickly, I am gone?'[510] This 'man/ Of the mind', this 'apparition apparelled' is as Nancy suggests, 'the event of Being' for Stevens – 'of my being and its knowing, part'.[511]

Looking back it would seem clear that Stevens was in some sense standing in Nietzsche's post-theological world in the poems of *Harmonium*, but that the progressive development of his work sought aesthetic forms that could fulfil the need left by the absence of religion. It was from the minutiae of Stevens' first collection that the project of a 'supreme fiction' was announced, but not fully pursued. Nietzsche's thought is undoubtedly useful for outlining the post-theological environment in which Stevens finds himself in his early poetry. However, in tracing Stevens' *development* of 'major man' and the 'supreme fiction' as alternative fictions to religion, Nietzsche's thought seems unable to take us much further. In a letter of 1942 Stevens says: 'About Nietzsche: I haven't read him since I was a

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[507] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 64.
[508] Wallace Stevens, 'Angel Surrounded by Paysans', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 423.
[509] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. by Robert D. Richardson and Anne E O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 174.
[510] Wallace Stevens, 'Angel Surrounded by Paysans', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 423.
[511] Ibid., p. 423.

young man. My interest in the hero, major man, the giant, has nothing to do with the Biermensch'.[512] In a letter to the same correspondent written later in the same year, Stevens relates that: 'The incessant job is to get into focus, not out of focus. Nietzsche is as perfect a means of getting out of focus as a little bit too much to drink.'[513] Contrary to Leggett's analysis, I would argue that although Stevens is certainly operating in a post-Nietzschean arena, it is his affinities with concepts resembling the pre-Socratics that characterizes his response to Nietzsche and the post-theological world in which he finds himself.

In what follows I intend to use the pre-Socratics and their thought as models for Stevens' own approach to a poetry that could replace religion, and to do that in the light of Jarraway's sense of the use of 'immanence' in Stevens.[514] This analysis will remain indifferent to a source-based proof and is as open to Stevens' encounters with pre-Socratic conceptions found within more contemporary poets and philosophers as to those found within the pre-Socratics themselves. As we progress, the analysis should also demonstrate the central importance of the specifically poetic language of the pre-Socratics, in considering why thinkers such as Heidegger and Gadamer should apply a truth-telling function to art and poetry. Further, in context of the pre-Socratics, I intend to analyze the truth-telling function of poetry in conjunction with the role of the artist, conceived as the protagonist who can bring the saving power of art to a world detached from theological order. Finally, we shall also demonstrate that in Stevens the idea of replacing religion with poetry is not, as Lentricchia says, 'banality', but rather that it is absolutely critical for understanding

[512] A Letter to Leonard Henry Church, June 12th, 1942. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 409.
[513] A Letter to Henry Church, December 8th, 1942. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 432.
[514] David R. Jarraway, 'Stevens and Belief', *The Cambridge Companion To Wallace Stevens*, p. 195.

how Stevens attempted to go beyond a mere religion of art, and fundamentally reconstruct the ground of religion on the terms of an ontological poetry.

The Xenophanean Account of the Religious Imagination

The pre-Socratic philosopher, Xenophanes of Colophon, had stated that:

> Yes, and if oxen and horses or lions had hands, and could paint with their hands, and produce works of art as men do, horses would paint the forms of the gods like horses, and oxen like oxen, and make their bodies in the image of their several kinds.[515]

In his reading of Müller Stevens would potentially have had access to the quote above from Müller's *Lectures on the Science of Language*, and certainly encountered it again in Burnet's *Early Greek Philosophy* in 1945.[516] Burnet, like Müller, also records that Xenophanes had written that[517]:

> The Ethiopians make their gods black and snub-nosed; the Thracians say theirs have blue eyes and red hair.[518]

The conception forms a strong parallel with an entry in Stevens' *Adagia*: 'Only a noble people evolve a noble God.'[519] Further that: 'The mind that in heaven created the earth and the mind that on earth created heaven were, as it happened, one.'[520] In a lecture entitled 'Two or Three Ideas', presented at Mount Holyoke College in 1951, Stevens intimates that he knows that: 'the gods of China are always Chinese; that the gods of Greece are always Greeks and that all gods are created in the images

[515] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 119.
[516] Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language*, pp. 423 - 424.
[517] Ibid., pp. 423 - 424.
[518] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 119.
[519] Wallace Stevens, 'Adagia', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 912.
[520] Ibid., p. 913.

of their creators'.[521] Again, in 'Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery', collected in *Ideas of Order*, Stevens wrote:

> God of the sausage-makers, sacred guild,
> Or possibly, the merest patron saint
> Ennobled as in a mirror to sanctity.[522]

Vendler refers to this stanza as 'the most ironic passage of all', suggesting that Stevens' conceives of the fifty stanzas in 'Like Decorations', as 'so many sausage links, presided over by the "god of the sausages"'.[523] However, although this may allude to Stevens' fifty 'sausages', Stevens confirmed in a letter of 1940 to Hi Simons, that this precise stanza could be paraphrased as: 'An anthropomorphic god is simply a projection of itself by a race of egoists, which it is natural for them to treat as sacred.'[524] This parallels the root of Xenophanean philosophy. What is interesting is that in the same letter, Stevens had also said: 'I ought to say that it is a habit of mind with me to be thinking of some substitute for religion.'[525] From this we can legitimately suppose that a strong parallel with Xenophanean philosophy amounts to part of Stevens' strategy for finding a 'substitute for religion.'

In 'Loneliness in Jersey City', collected in *Parts*, Stevens considers that the people and their religious imaginations are an extension of nature:

> The deer and the dachshund are one.
> Well, the gods grow out of the weather.
> The people grow out of the weather;
> The gods grow out of the people.[526]

Nature, the people and the religious imagination are conceived as 'one' thing. All are reduced in the single, self perpetuating growth. The concept mirrors the reductive

[521] Wallace Stevens, 'Two or Three Ideas', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 846.
[522] Wallace Stevens, 'Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 127.
[523] Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings – Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems*, p. 69.
[524] A Letter to Hi Simons, January 9th, 1940. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 349.
[525] Ibid., p. 348.
[526] Wallace Stevens, 'Loneliness in Jersey City', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 191.

sense of the Greek notion of *phusis*. Stevens would adapt the notion to the Christian religion in 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', suggesting that in Eden:

> Eve made air the mirror of herself,
> Of her sons and of her daughters. They found themselves
> In heaven as in a glass; a second earth[527]

Stevens uses the same conception of a vain reflection of self, whether attempting to discredit the Christian religion or the pagan religions. What Bloom refers to as the 'primal narcissism' here, forms a parallel with Xenophanes' inadvertent reversal of the Biblical account that says that God created mankind in His own image.[528] Stevens is suggesting that 'air' is the ground for anthropomorphic deities that are a product of the imagination.

We know that Xenophanes had said that if oxen had hands, then they would paint their gods to resemble themselves.[529] Stevens provides a textual link to this 'ox' in conceiving of 'Oxidia' in poem XXX of 'Blue Guitar'. The intention, as with 'Loneliness in Jersey City', seems to be to demonstrate that a mythology is an extension of the people, who are themselves an extension of their place:

> Through Oxidia, banal suburb,
> One-half of all its installments paid.
>
> Dew-dapper clapper-traps, blazing
> From the crusty stacks above machines.
>
> Ecce, Oxidia is the seed
> Dropped out of this amber-ember pod,
>
> Oxidia is the soot of fire,
> Oxidia is Olympia.[530]

[527] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 331.
[528] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, p. 183.
[529] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 119.
[530] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 149.

Stevens wrote of this poem in 1953 that:

> if Oxidia is the only possible Olympia, in any real sense, then Oxidia is that from which Olympia must come. Oxidia is both the seed and the amber-ember pod from which the seed of Olympia drops. The dingier the life, the more lustrous the paradise. But if the only paradise must be here and now, Oxidia is Olympia.[531]

Stevens could be seen to be playing with a notion that parallels Xenophanes and showing that our 'oxide' stained reality has led humanity to conceive of an oxide stained heaven, 'Olympia' ('Oxidia'), that is at hand. The pun on the 'ox' appears to have a textual relationship to Xenophanes, working equally well as 'oxide', or perhaps ox-hide. The language attempts to drag 'Olympia' down to earth, into the 'crusty stacks' of 'banal' mechanised reality, an earthly 'seed' of 'soot'. It reinvests the religious imagination with the dirty reality that produced it. It is the moment of the opening of poetry that provides the single ground for this new equation. This is extended with the heavy use of hyphens that suggests two connected as one, 'one-half', where 'amber-ember pod' and 'seed' are one, the 'Oxidia' of the here and now.

The lines are an example of modernist literature's tendency to express modern life with ambivalence. This 'banal suburb' with its 'Dew-dapper clapper-traps, blazing/ From crusty stacks above machines', is contrasted with the use of 'Ecce' and 'Olympia', which evoke the golden ages of the past, in this instance, mirroring the thought of ancient Greece. It is the projection of the religious ideal from the reality near at hand that forges an association with Xenophanes. For Stevens, 'heaven' is close at hand, in immanence. This Xenophanean style of presentation could fulfil the modernist concept that suggests 'that art is properly art –

[531] A Letter to Renato Poggioli, July 12th, 1953. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, pp. 788 – 789..

and *arts* – only when it is withdrawn from the sole service of divine presentation, and when it presents itself *as such*.'[532]

The Unveiling of 'Major Man'

Stevens' use of the trope, 'major man', could sound as if he were seeking the ultimate human, the supreme anthropomorphic 'man'. However, if we seek for the origin of 'major man', one may perhaps choose to look at Hoon connected to the amorphous limits of his own imagination, in 'Tea at the Palaz of Hoon' from Stevens' first collection:

> Not less because in purple I descended
> The western day through what you called
> The loneliest air, not less was I myself.
>
> What was the ointment sprinkled on my beard?
> What were the hymns that buzzed beside my ears?
> What was the sea whose tide swept through me there?
>
> Out of my mind the golden ointment rained,
> And my ears made the blowing hymns they heard.
> I was myself the compass of that sea:
>
> I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
> Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
> And there I found myself more truly and more strange.[533]

Clearly Hoon is connected to something larger than a subjective self extant *in* the world; rather he is aligned with the possibilities of his own imagination. Everything seen, heard or felt comes from 'myself'. 'I' is reduced to 'world' as Stevens in the mask of Hoon evidences signs of the 'involuntary and desperate Transcendentalist' that he would soon reject.[534] However, just because Stevens imagines himself descending 'the western day' dressed 'in purple', does not mean that this imagined

[532] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, p. 38.
[533] Wallace Stevens, 'Tea at the Palaz of Hoon', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 51.
[534] Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, p. 25.

self is not still a part of 'himself'. The scope and limits of what constitutes a 'self' are being broadened ('not less was I myself') through the imagination. What this doesn't include is everyone else, or the objective world that lies outside of his own imagination. It is also notable that in accordance with the Xenophanean philosophy, Hoon's projection of his world includes the religious as a product of the mind, as it is his 'ears' that 'made' the 'hymns they heard'.

Stevens' model for a self enlarged through the imagination bears some resemblance to elements of the persona of the pre-Socratic philosopher, Empedocles, who like Parmenides, had also written his philosophy in verse. In legend, Empedocles was thought to have thrown himself into a volcano (Etna) that he may become a 'god'.[535] He had written that: 'I go among you an immortal god'.[536] Hillis Miller considers that Hoon 'enjoys a sense of kinglike power and, godlike, disposes things freely, by legislative fiat'.[537] The model of a 'destruction' of anthropomorphic form in favour of a rebirth to 'godlike' status through poetry, may have appealed to Stevens, just as the same subject matter had appealed to Hölderlin and Arnold before him. In context of his 'godlike' status, Empedocles had also vaunted himself in an iconic purple robe, which resonates with Hoon who is also 'dressed in purple'. Accounts of Empedocles show that: 'He went about in a purple robe with a golden girdle, in shoes of bronze, and [with] a Delphic laurel wreath on his head.'[538] W.K.C. Guthrie notes that he was 'something of a *poseur* in externals, and had a lively appreciation for sacerdotal pomp and impressiveness.'[539] Further that 'he had both a

[535] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 202.
[536] Ibid., p. 222.
[537] J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality*, p. 256.
[538] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The pre-Platonic Philosophers*, trans. and ed. by Greg Whitlock (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), p. 108.
[539] W.K.C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 231.

knowledge of the real Orphic beliefs and an inward feeling for their truth, and was capable of a high degree of mystical experience.'[540] Hoon's own 'purple' attire could certainly be read in other terms, for example as arbitrary flamboyance or self-lampooning dandyism. However, the notions of destroying anthropomorphic form, wielding 'godlike' status, and the expression of 'inward' 'mystical experience' within poetry, are clearly evident within the poem itself. What subsequent poems will show is an increasingly strong link with Empedocles as a means of destroying anthropomorphic form. The same poems will also demonstrate that Hoon himself is a false start for 'major man', because the 'world' with which he is one in the poem is only his imagined world, locked out of an inclusion of objective 'reality' that includes other people. The 'sea whose tide swept through' Hoon is only the sea of *his* imagination.

Arguably, the concept of 'major man' was fully universalized through 'The Idea of Order at Key West', which depicts an encounter with a real sea. Here the 'enchanting night' 'descended' (rather than Hoon who 'descended' 'The loneliest air' of 'The western day') and was 'Mastered', a process which literally enacted a marriage of heaven and earth that included the 'self'.[541] Importantly, this new reduction only comes after Stevens had destroyed Hoon in 'Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz', from *Ideas of Order*, seemingly because of his detachment from reality in his 'mountain-minded' 'order' of 'solitude'.[542] However, this mode of destruction could be seen as a further parallel with the model of Empedocles leaping into the volcano (Etna) to be reborn as a 'god'. In the poem entitled 'A Postcard from the Volcano' (which advocates a very Empedoclean sounding philosophy) also collected in *Ideas*

[540] Ibid., p. 231.
[541] Wallace Stevens, 'The Idea of Order at Key West', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 106.
[542] Wallace Stevens, 'Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 100.

of Order, a 'spirit' is 'left behind' by 'he that lived there' in the 'mansion-house', 'storming in blank walls'.[543] This might be read as Hoon's spirit from the 'Palaz of Hoon', with the 'postcard' arguably coming from Hoon himself in the volcano. It could be that Hoon, like Empedocles, is awaiting a rebirth into complete *being* that includes the imagination, but also the 'dirty' and 'gutted' 'reality' that the poem refers to.[544] The gesture for Stevens, as with much of *Ideas of Order*, appears to be one of poetic rebirth. In fact, according to Kingsley, 'by leaping into Etna Empedocles jumps into fire. For the Greeks the function of fire was above all purificatory, particularly in relation to the underworld and the dead.'[545] Arguably, Stevens is ritually de-creating Hoon within a similar pattern of myth in order to reassemble him as 'major man', aligned with complete *being*.

Just as Stevens seems to collapse anthropomorphism in favour of an enlarged existence through the Empedoclean model, so he also appears to establish 'major man' through the Xenophanean model. Arguably, 'major man' is further unveiled in 'Blue Guitar', because here Stevens combines 'the lion in the lute' (imagination) and the 'lion locked in stone' (reality) in oneness, and reduces this oneness to *himself* ('That I may reduce the monster to/ Myself').[546] According to the Xenophanean model, the imagined 'lion' deity seems to be collapsed back to the self in the event of opening the total connection of *being* through a *poesis*. This was not the first time that Stevens had attempted this, as a remembrance of 'the mind of winter' in 'The Sun This March' also resulted in 'lions coming down'.[547] The development plotted through *Ideas of Order* to 'Blue Guitar' is an enlargement of

[543] Wallace Stevens, 'A Postcard From the Volcano', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 128 - 129.
[544] Ibid., p. 129.
[545] Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic - Empedocles and Pythagorian Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 253.
[546] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 143.
[547] Wallace Stevens, 'The Sun This March', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 109.

Hoon's subjective imagination to the inclusion of the *universal* imagination (religious or otherwise) *and* 'reality', as the enlarged ground for a new vision of 'self'. Hoon's 'mountain-minded' order of 'solitude' is replaced by the 'thought-like Monadnocks'.[548] Self, reality, imagination and the 'gods' of the imagination, are all placed in *total* 'immanence' through a *poesis*. Xenophanes had said that lions and oxen would paint their gods as lions and oxen, suggesting that deities are an extension of self. Stevens' remedy, however, appears to have been *to reverse the process*, to collapse the concept of the imagined deity back to *himself* and, enlarged through it, collapse himself back to nature to become what he calls 'major man', the single immanent ground from which to perpetually paint what 'man' is, or could be.

By accepting the *total* reality of 'immanence', Stevens denies that God is a reality and chooses instead to believe in 'immanence'. It is the opening of poetic language that causes the collapse of mankind and imagined 'deity' to one 'thing'. 'Oxidia' had 'dropped' from the 'amber-ember pod', just as in 'Notes' 'Phoebus' would 'slumber and die in autumn umber', with the 'autumn umber' echoing the 'amber-ember'.[549] The act of opening poetry collapses all ideas, high or low, to the single equality of the one work in its opening. This is the one ground from which Stevens paints, or abstracts. Xenophanes, like Parmenides and Empedocles had written his philosophy in verse. According to Heidegger and Gadamer poetic opening induces a connection with *being*, a transformation, a 'candor', that connects the universal to 'Myself' and reconstitutes the ground of human *being*. Such a reconstitution includes the religious imagination in the equality of 'mere being'.

[548] Wallace Stevens, 'This Solitude of Cataracts', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 366.
[549] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 329.

In ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’ Stevens clearly expresses the general principle of collapsing the imagined ‘deity’ and the self back to reality, in the oneness of *phusis*:

> A substitute for all the gods:
> This self, not that gold self aloft,
>
> Alone, one's shadow magnified,
> Lord of the body, looking down,
>
> As now and called most high,
> The shadow of Chocorua
>
> In an immenser heaven, aloft,
> Alone, lord of the land and lord
>
> Of the men that live in the land, high lord.
> One's self and the mountains of one's land,
>
> Without shadows, without magnificence,
> The flesh, the bone, the dirt, the stone.[550]

Stevens' reduction of self and the imagined deity is back to *phusis*, back to 'The flesh, the bone, the dirt, the stone.' The self ‘magnified’, enlarged in the ‘shadow’ of the mountain ‘Chocorua’, expresses the collapse of the imagined ‘gold self aloft’ into the mountains of one’s land. *Metaphysica specialis* is becoming a pre-Socratic inspired ‘reduction of metaphysics’ of which poetry is the engine. It bears the characteristics of a modern recreation of the romantic connection of ‘god’ corresponding to man through art, though for Stevens as for Xenophanes, the conception was always immanent in the human imagination, always grounded in ‘reality’.

The language of the poem demonstrates what it is arguing, namely that this ‘reality’ is ‘one’. It is the *totality* of an ‘immenser heaven’ that Stevens is enacting through the opening of poetic language. Thus the ‘shadow of Chocorua’ is part of

[550] Wallace Stevens, ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 144.

‘one’s shadow magnified’ with the existential abandonment of being ‘Alone’. It is ‘one’s self’ and the reduced mountains of ‘one’s land’ where this amorphous ‘lord’ stands, ready to erupt into new fictions as the seasons of ‘himself’ roll on. The repetition of ‘one’ drags high heaven down to the earth, investing ‘This self’ with heaven’s height as a possibility of the imagination. Pre-Socratic conceptions provide the post-Nietzschean philosopher or poet with a means of connecting humanity to the ‘substance’ of a region and to the ‘mythology’ of that region. The effect, as with the earlier ‘change’ and ‘freshness’, is to be made anew, to be ‘freshened’. This making is a painting out of the ‘horde of destructions’, in the substance of the ‘rock’ that attempts to reconnect man to universal *being*. It is through the perpetual painting of new forms out of this single ground that demonstrates one aspect of Stevens’ relation to modernism. Adorno shows Stevens to be connected to a ‘reprise’ of ancient thinking of the ‘Absolute’, when he says of the Heidegger of *Being and Time* that: ‘It was a second reprise of the old philosophies of the Absolute, their first reprise having been post-Kantian idealism.’[551]

The act of bringing the 'lion in the lute' ‘Before’ the 'lion locked in stone', through poetry, seems to have opened the complete *archê* in which Stevens could collapse the lion’s envisioned lion deity, back to a oneness that included himself.[552] The ‘lion’ has a strong textual link to that imagined Xenophanean lion, but now reduced to a oneness with humanity. This connection is what makes 'major man' a giant at the centre of reality. It seems to be why in the next collection (*Parts*) Stevens could say:

himself
At the centre of reality, seeing it.

[551] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 62.
[552] Wallace Stevens, ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 143.

It was everything bulging and blazing and big in itself[553]

The ‘self’ at the ‘centre’ of ‘reality’ is enlarged and ‘reality’ itself is ‘blazing’, precisely as it was for Empedocles in the fiery ‘underworld’, where all polarities were united. ‘Blazing’ was a word that Stevens had used to describe the imagined heaven of ‘Oxidia’ in poem XXX from ‘Blue Guitar’, which he had begun by saying: ‘From this I shall evolve a man’.[554] The moment of the opening of poetry aligns ‘self’ and ‘world’, prior to the dissection of the world in language derived from the intellect. This is arguably why it is a 'large' 'man' who is reading of *being* in ‘Large Red Man Reading’.[555] For Stevens the act produces an enlargement, a connection to *being*.

Lions and oxen appear repeatedly in Stevens’ canon, often together. Bloom makes the casual observation that there are ‘plenty of lions in Stevens’, which he says are ‘emblems of the poetic Will-to-Power, stemming perhaps from Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*.’[556] Just as the ‘firecat’ may be a Heraclitean conception, equally as it could be, as Leggett suggested, “modeled upon Zarathustra’s ‘fire-dog’”, so too, Stevens’ use of lions may be Xenophanean and not necessarily Nietzschean.[557] Bloom and Leggett favour a Nietzschean context for Stevens’ ‘emblems’ of power. The point here is that the pre-Socratics show themselves to be useful to post-Nietzschean philosophers, and poets, for constructing alternatives to the religious imagination. This is not to deny a sense of Nietzschean thinking in Stevens at all, nor to forget how entrenched in specifically Heraclitean thought certain elements of Nietzsche’s writings were, but to suggest that pre-Socratism offered artists and

[553] Wallace Stevens, ‘The Latest Freed Man’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 187.
[554] Wallace Stevens, ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 149.
[555] Wallace Stevens, ‘Large Red Man Reading’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 365.
[556] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, pp. 174 - 175.
[557] B.J. Leggett, *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext*, pp. 210 - 211.

thinkers a means of building out of post-theological nihilism; perhaps because their philosophy predated Plato and in some sense formed an 'original' poetic ground.

Parts of a World develops the inversion of Stevens' parallel of the Xenophanean model further, but in accordance with the concerns of that collection the reduction is characterised by *polemos*:

> That's what misery is,
> Nothing to have at heart.
> It is to have or nothing.
>
> It is a thing to have,
> A lion, an ox in his breast,
> To feel it breathing there.
>
> Corazon, stout dog,
> Young ox, bow-legged bear,
> He tastes its blood, not spit.
>
> He is like a man
> In the body of a violent beast.
> Its muscles are his own…
>
> The lion sleeps in the sun.
> Its nose is on its paws.
> It can kill a man.[558]

'Misery' appears to be the nihilism of theological detachment, 'Nothing to have at heart'. 'Possession', in the sense of 'to have', is a lion or ox in your breast, which is like the imagined Xenophanean lion or ox reduced with the self to a single ground. 'To have or nothing' creates the presence/absence dynamic and it is the 'nothing' of the imagined animals that will become presence, 'to feel'. It is this moment of poetic opening that is the enlargement of 'major man'.

[558] Wallace Stevens, 'Poetry is a Destructive Force', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 178.

The lion and the ox, again used together, are comparable to the lion and ox used by Xenophanes. This is Stevens directly after poem XIX of 'Blue Guitar'. The reduction of the human, nature and the religious imagination are all in his breast like the sleeping volcano, Corazon of Ecuador. It is in his breast because 'corazon' is the Spanish word for heart. However, as we have seen, for the ancient Greeks volcanoes are also entrances to the mythical 'underworld' (the 'heart' of the world), the place where *all* paradoxes of difference were purported to meet in 'oneness'. With regard to Stevens' *Transport* poem, 'Esthétique du Mal', Patke astutely observes Kant's references in the *Critique of Judgement* to the insignificance of our resistance in the face of the violence of volcanoes, and identifies Arnold's 'Empedocles' as sharing 'a number of interesting affinities' with Stevens.[559]

In 'Poetry is a Destructive Force', the reduction is achieved by a palpable breathing in him and the bodily presence of muscle and blood without form. It enacts the collapse of the old projections of the imagination back into the muscular, earthly self. In tasting its blood, not his spit, Stevens has replaced the Eucharist with the equation of what resembles Xenophanes' lion deity and the self in nature. Stevens' 'Communion' appears to be with *phusis*, meaning all nature as one thing, including the imagination. The 'violent beast' is *at once* inside of him, like his heart, and outside of him as 'He' is 'In the body of a violent beast'. The forging of this single 'immanence' is achieved through the 'candor' of the opening of poetic language. The model is precisely the same in 'The Glass of Water', another poem collected in *Parts*, where an evocation of *being* as *polemos* at the 'centre of our lives' also results in 'the lion that comes down'.[560]

[559] Rajeev S. Patke, *The Long Poems of Wallace Stevens – An Interpretive Study*, pp. 169 - 170.
[560] Wallace Stevens, 'The Glass of Water', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 181.

‘The Latest Freed Man’ seems to continue this equation of poet (as human) and the imagined 'deity’ in the massiveness of nature in *being*, again as a violent struggle (*polemos*). In this case it is the ‘freed man’ who is collapsed into the ‘ox’, at one with all things:

> And so the freed man said.
>
> It was how the sun came shinning into his room:
> To be without a description of to be,
> For a moment on rising, at the edge of the bed, to be,
> To have the ant of the self changed to an ox
> With its organic boomings, to be changed
> From a doctor into an ox, before standing up,
> To know that the change and that the ox-like struggle
> Come from the strength that is the strength of the sun,
> Whether it comes directly or from the sun.
> It was how he was free. It was how his freedom came.
> It was being without description, being an ox.[561]

The transformation (‘change’) has occurred (‘To have the ant of the self changed to an ox’). The ox is not the poet’s animal nature, but it is *phusis* in *totalis* (which includes the imagination) and it is the opening of a new *poesis* that evokes the ‘change’. It appears to be the fusing of what looks like Xenophanes’ ox to its envisioned ox deity, connected in the self as the only kind of ‘god’ that exists for Stevens, 'major man'. The mode is again one of *polemos*: ‘The ox-like struggle/ Come from the strength that is the strength of the sun.’ Poetic opening equates high and low and makes them one with the ease of pure opening. ‘Major man’ remains an amorphous figure that ‘himself’ includes all forms, all religion, as a ‘saviour’ of connection in the ‘one’ that purportedly nullifies *polemos*.

Leggett notes that ‘Oxen are strangely anachronistic animals for twentieth-century texts’, which we can agree they are.[562] However, in favouring a Nietzschean

[561] Wallace Stevens, ‘The Latest Freed Man’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 187.

connection Leggett argues that this 'ox', in its linkage to the rejection of truth, is 'a direct experience of the world without the intervention of truth, of metaphysics or doctrine.'[563] Though Stevens' poem certainly celebrates the freedom derived from the connection to the 'ox', I would argue that this relationship is only achieved through a connection in a 'reduction of metaphysics' to *being* and *becoming*. The terms 'be' or 'being' are used six times in those twelve lines, and the freedom results in a reduction to *being* that is itself 'being without description'. Stevens' poetic consciousness inhabits the moment of the opening of poetic language, the 'candor' that 'gives a candid kind to everything'.[564] It is what Stevens defined as the 'first idea' which is of course no rational 'idea'; it is the opening of *being*. Such reductive thinking changes the meaning of a poem to ontological opening in primacy as the poet performs himself what Clark had suggested was a weakness in a Heideggerian reading of a poem. The standing of *being* is set against the *becoming* of 'rising', 'changed' and 'change' which together are the connection that results in the elevation of self through the 'reduction of metaphysics'. It is through a language of 'immanence' that Stevens collapses what looks like Xenophanes' 'ox' back to the self as an elevation of this 'high lord'.

In *Lectures on the Science of Language* Müller had recorded that Xenophanes 'himself declares, in the most unhesitating manner - and this nearly 600 years before our era - that "God is one, the greatest among gods and men, neither in form nor in thought like unto men".[565] From Burnet, Stevens would have seen that

[562] B.J. Leggett, *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext*, p. 245.
[563] Ibid., p. 245.
[564] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 331.
[565] Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language*, pp. 423 - 424.

Aristotle says that: 'Xenophanes, "referring to the whole world, said the One was god."'[566] In 'Asides on the Oboe', collected in *Parts*, Stevens had referred to:

> The man who has had the time to think enough,
> The central man, the human globe, responsive
> As a mirror with a voice, the man of glass,
> Who in a million diamonds sums us up.[567]

'I was the world in which I walked' says Hoon.[568] Bloom suggests that this 'human globe' is 'of Emersonian tradition' and certainly there are passages in Emerson that are reminiscent of how Stevens paints 'him'.[569] Yet in denying the ontological connection in Stevens' poetry, Bloom, like Lentricchia, fails to grasp the fundamental depth of recalibration that Stevens is seeking between religion and poetry. Stevens' conception of 'major man' could equally be seen as expressing a sense of Xenophanes' amorphous 'god', which is 'one', a collapse into immanence. When Stevens recalls his reading of Müller, when he was 'young', he reminisces that:

> The essence of all this, quite apart from its hieratic and religious significance, is of the greatest interest in connection with the poetic side of humanism.[570]

'Major man' may not be a type of Nietzschean 'Biermensch' as Stevens says, though the concept does bear a strong resemblance to the compounding of Xenophanean philosophy to a connection of the self at the centre of the deified 'one'.[571] In this philosophical sense the self inhabits the 'deity', which is a sphere without anthropomorphic form for Stevens, as for Xenophanes. 'Inside' and 'outside' in

[566] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 127.
[567] Wallace Stevens, 'Asides on the Oboe', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 227.
[568] Wallace Stevens, 'Tea at the Palaz of Hoon', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 51.
[569] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, p. 162.
[570] A Letter to Leonard C. van Geyzel, December 9th, 1940. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 381.
[571] A Letter to Henry Church, June 12th, 1942. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 409.

context of this 'deity' become connected as Stevens constructs this 'impossible possible philosophers' man'.[572]

The reason Xenophanes might appeal to Stevens could be wholly bound up with Stevens' sense of the importance of art. Gadamer suggests that: 'Only in the representation of the human form does the whole content of the work speak to us, at the same time, as an expression of its object.'[573] It is this blend of subject and object that redefines human limitations, incorporating the limits of the imagination into the potential 'form' of the whole. It is therefore a fluctuating, inhuman 'form' that befits a modern spin on romanticism, in that it allows for a perpetual change that includes the immanent religious imagination along with everything ('a million diamonds') and everyone ('sums us up'), through the work of art. Xenophanes provides an image of this 'figure' for the modern artist, laughing at the 'gods' as he conceives of it.

In 'Notes' Stevens would name 'major man' overtly for the first time. Here Stevens appears to outline a connection with *being* that comes from *not* thinking, at least not thinking rationally. This connection results in 'major man':

> The romantic intoning, the declaimed clairvoyance
> Are parts of apotheosis, appropriate
> And of its nature, the idiom thereof.
>
> They differ from reason's click-clack, its applied
> Enflashings. But apotheosis is not
> The origin of the major man. He comes,
>
> Compact in invincible foils, from reason,
> Lighted at midnight by the studious eye,
> Swaddled in revery, the object of
>
> The hum of thoughts evaded in the mind,
> Hidden from other thoughts[574]

[572] Wallace Stevens, 'Asides on the Oboe', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 226.
[573] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 42.
[574] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 335.

David La Guardia appears to be correct to suggest that 'major man', 'swaddled in revery', 'is about to be canonized a replacement saviour'.[575] For Stevens, it is the avoidance of the rational and the acceptance of 'the more than rational distortion' that arises in its place that is the origin of 'major man', not apotheosis:

> Yet look not at his colored eyes. Give him
> No names. Dismiss him from your images.
> The hot of him is purest in the heart.[576]

It is 'being without description' evoked in the 'look not' and the 'Dismiss him' that is the 'hot' of 'him' felt in the 'heart', like the volcanic heart of 'Corazon' found at the centre. The lines enact the 'candor' of a connection to *being*, without anthropomorphic form, as the renewal of art sets it to work.

In *Auroras* there is evidence to suggest that Stevens' 'purpose' for 'major man' is for him to act as a 'saviour', capable of reconnecting people's lives to a complete reality that has been drained of the religious. *In Lectures on the Science of Religion* Müller had suggested that if we could only descend ourselves into 'the dark catacombs of ancient thought', we should feel ourselves to be in the presence of men who 'would be looked upon as giants'.[577] Müller was speaking of the pre-Socratics (while alluding to the 'dark catacombs' of the 'underworld') and it is intriguing to find that it is a 'large' red man that Stevens envisions as reading from the 'great' tabulae. Hölderlin relates that:

> Empedocles is a son of his heaven and his time, of his fatherland, a son of tremendous oppositions of nature and art in which the world appeared before his eyes. A man within whom those oppositions are united *so* intimately that they become one within him.[578]

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[575] David M. La Guardia, *Advance on Chaos: The Sanctifying Imagination of Wallace Stevens* (Hanover, N.E.: Brown University Press, 1983), p. 82.
[576] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 336.
[577] Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language*, p. 332.
[578] Friedrich Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, pp. 54 - 55.

Though the Empedoclean model is certainly not the only reading that can be offered, its consistent emergence forms a strong parallel with Stevens' concept of 'major man', as the means of connecting people to the world in a way that religion had previously fulfilled:

> There were ghosts that returned to earth to hear his
> phrases,
> As he sat there reading, aloud, the great blue tabulae.
> They were those from the wilderness of stars that had
> expected more.
>
> There were those that returned to hear him read from the
> poem of life,
> Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the
> tulips among them.
> They were those that would have wept to step barefoot into
> reality,
>
> That would have wept and been happy, have shivered in the
> frost
> And cried out to feel it again, have run fingers over leaves
> And against the most coiled thorn, have seized on what was
> ugly
>
> And laughed, as he sat there reading, from out of the purple
> tabulae,
> The outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its
> law:
> *Poesis, poesis,* the literal characters, the vatic lines,
>
> Which in those ears and in those thin, those spended hearts,
> Took on color, took on shape and the size of things as they
> are
> And spoke the feeling for them, which was what they had
> lacked.[579]

Empedocles had written: 'Thou shalt bring back from Hades the life of a dead man.'[580] This mirrors the sense of why these ghosts return to hear these phrases, because they are spoken in a way that resembles the Empedoclean sense, that *being*

[579] Wallace Stevens, 'Large Red Man Reading', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 365.
[580] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 221.

is one and that nothing that is in *being*, regardless of the dissemination of parts, can cease to 'be'.[581] The 'large' 'red man' is arguably 'large' because he is connected to (and occupies) Stevens' sense of complete reality, which includes death. Life-forces return to earth in the poem because the 'large' red man is reading aloud, evoking: 'The outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its/ Law'. 'He' has become one with the ground of *being*. For Stevens it is a *poesis* that puts *being* to work, raising new life into the here and now in a sense identical to Gadamer's notion of 'play', as a connection to *being*. Under this thinking a poem *is* 'the literal characters' and 'the vatic lines' that unveil the oneness of *being*. Speaking it connects the seemingly dead to Stevens' sense of the wholeness of life. The poetic language of the pre-Socratics provides a perfect archetype for this mode of opening *being*, as well as for the enlargement of 'major man'.

Stevens' depiction of fetching back the ghosts here is one of connecting people to the *being* of 'reality', a reality that includes death. Santayana's *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900) offers a possible source for speculating on how Stevens *may* have attempted to use pre-Socratic thought to connect people to 'reality'. Arguably the connection was designed to fulfil the desire for the 'religious' through a connection with the concept of the 'One'. Santayana writes:

> Thus mysticism, although a principle of dissolution, carries with it the safeguard that it can never be consistently applied. We reach it only in exceptional moments of intuition, from which we descend to our pots and pans with habits and instincts virtually unimpaired. Life goes on; virtues and affections endure, none the worse, the mystic feels, for that slight film of unreality which envelops them in a mind not unacquainted with ecstasy.[582]

Santayana advocates that the mystic should, on behalf of others, awaken them to the 'slight film of unreality', rising from the sea of 'ex', which connects them to the

[581] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 209.
[582] George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, pp. 15 - 16.

ecstasy of the mystic, which in turn connects them once again to the 'pots and pans' and 'habits and instincts'.[583] This is a direct textual and conceptual link to Stevens' poem in connecting these 'ghosts' to 'the pans above the stove, the pots on the table'. The poem suggests that it is only by connecting the imagination to reality that the mystic at their centre can connect people to the 'One'. Santayana continues:

> moderately indulged in and duly inhabited by a residuum of conventional sanity, it serves to give a touch of strangeness and elevation to the character and to suggest superhuman gifts. It is not, however, in the least superhuman. It is hardly even abnormal, being only an exaggeration of a rational interest in the highest abstractions.[584]

The word 'residuum', the giving of 'a touch' and the suggestion of 'superhuman gifts' that are not 'abnormal', but only a 'rational interest in the highest abstractions', connects Santayana's comments very closely to Stevens' poem. Santayana defines his conception of this 'rational interest in the highest abstractions', having just been speaking of Parmenides, with: 'The divine, the universal, the absolute, even the One, are legitimate conceptions.'[585] It is Empedocles in his philosophical 'poetry', who gave account of his use of the 'One' (*being*) to raise the dead.[586] Whereas Parmenides had actually envisioned a flight into the 'underworld', Empedocles had 'incarnated the teaching in himself' as a 'more-than-human teacher' who 'discovered the immortal at the heart of the mortal, the divine in the middle of the human.'[587] Hölderlin had considered of Empedocles that: 'Such a human being can only grow out of the highest opposition of nature and art.'[588] Stevens' ontological poetry drops the image of anthropomorphic 'man' into a single pool of *being*, where it is

[583] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 143.
[584] George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, p. 16.
[585] Ibid., p. 16.
[586] Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic - Empedocles and Pythagorian Tradition*, p. 218.
[587] Peter Kingsley, *Reality*, pp. 339 - 340.
[588] Friedrich Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, p. 55.

presented as occupying the totality of that pool, amorphous, waiting to be made anew.

For post-Nietzschean philosophers and poets, the pre-Socratics, at the axis of the mystical and the philosophical, provided poetic models of a form of mysticism without the need for belief. An inconstant 'belief' which as Santayana says, 'can never be consistently applied.' The descent into the 'underworld' and the return with 'complete reality' embodied in the self, allowed thinkers and poets to express this 'mysticism' through art without the dogma of organised religion, while attempting to fulfil a sense of connection that had been drained from human experience. For Hölderlin, Empedocles provided an embodiment of that 'connection':

> In the way that with Empedocles art and nature are reunited at the extreme of their opposition, that the active principle becomes excessively objective and that the lost subjectivity is replaced by the profound effect of the object.[589]

The modern amendment would appear to be the emphasis, not only on art as the mode of connection with the otherness of the universe, but in following that otherness as a constant process of destruction and rebirth. In other words, belief is in an inconstancy and religion is an alignment of 'self' with that inconstancy.

Stevens' particular 'resurrection' resembles a 'resurrection' of what Parmenides called 'two-faced' people to a sense of *being* in the everyday.[590] The everyday aspect ('pots' and 'pans') ties in with Santayana's assertion that it is not 'superhuman', but presents itself as 'the hardly even abnormal' 'highest abstractions', derived from 'the One', a Parmenidean conception which is apparently demystified through its connection to 'philosophy'.[591] The inference could be seen to be that without it people are as good as dead, disconnected from 'reality' that

[589] Ibid., p. 61.
[590] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 174.
[591] George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, p. 16.

arguably includes death and the 'ugly' for Stevens. In his *Materia Poetica,* Stevens had written that:

The poet is the intermediary between people and the world in which they live and, also, between people as between themselves; but not between people and some other world.[592]

Poetry is the ground of connection for Stevens through his ontologically grounded 'imagination'. The limit of what it means to be human is found in the limits of *being* for this thinking.

'Large Red Man Reading' could also be drawing upon the persona and stories surrounding Heraclitus. Stevens' effort in the poem was to connect people to their 'pots' and 'pans' in the kitchen, to the universal 'One' as Santayana had suggested, which is the enlargement of 'major man':

> There were those that returned to hear him read from the
> poem of life,
> Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the
> tulips among them.[593]

In fulfilling his determination in *Adagia* to connect people to their world, free of the transcendental religious imagination, Stevens, like Santayana, appears to recall a story told of Heraclitus as Guthrie relates:

some callers, seeing him warming himself at the kitchen stove, hesitated to enter his house, but he told them not to be afraid, 'for there were gods there too'.[594]

Hölderlin, in context of Heraclitus had said the following in *Hyperion*:

"The man," I resumed, "who has not at least *once* in his life felt full, pure beauty in himself, when the powers of his being merged like the colors in the rainbow, who has never felt the profound harmony that arises among all things only in hours of exaltation.[595]

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[592] Wallace Stevens, 'Materia Poetica', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 919.
[593] Wallace Stevens, 'Large Red Man Reading', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 365.
[594] W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Volume I – The Earlier Presocratics and the Pythagoreans*, pp. 65 - 66.
[595] Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hyperion and Selected Poems*, p. 66.

This connection of 'his being merged like colors in the rainbow' through 'harmony' and 'exaltation' forms an extremely close parallel with Stevens' poem. The red and blue tabulae merged as what becomes the purple tabulae, which in Stevens' sense is part of this 'major man', part of complete *being* that includes reality and the imagination. To read from the 'purple tabulae' is to be 'flicked by feeling', to pronounce the syllables of the 'blue' imagination and the 'red' reality combined. Hölderlin continues, confirming the connection with Heraclitus as follows:

> The great saying, the εν διαφερον εαυτω (the one differentiated in itself) of Heraclitus, could be found only by a Greek, for it is the very being of Beauty, and before that was found there was no philosophy.[596]

Through the pre-Socratics directly and through the subsequent poets and philosophers who had adopted elements of their conceptions, Stevens would not only have had access to a philosophy of this kind to inspire his poetry, but also the personas of mystical, poet, healer magicians, the 'saviours' through which he could attempt to connect people to the pre-Socratic concept of the 'One', in the guise of 'major man'. The emphasis can be read as finding an alternative to what Stevens saw as transcendental religious concepts, themselves ridiculed by Xenophanes.

A sense of the Xenophanean philosophy would explain why Leggett considers that Stevens himself in the late poem, 'Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour', collected in *The Rock*, is an 'inhabitant' of 'a larger imagination', a "central mind."'[597] Like the Xenophanean philosophy, this thinking conflates the 'deity' with the central man at the centre of the central mind, a oneness with the human globe, similar to that which Xenophanes had envisioned:

> We say God and the imagination are one…
> How high that highest candle lights the dark.

[596] Ibid., p. 67.
[597] B.J. Leggett, *Late Stevens – The Final Fiction*, p. 51.

Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
We make a dwelling in the evening air,
In which being there together is enough.[598]

Yet this seems to be a more complex case than that of God corresponding with man in the romantic sense. Jarraway insightfully states that:

Hence, moving beyond the binary opposition of classical mimesis (man corresponding to God) and the romantic poesis (God corresponding to man), we conceivably find a poet motivated by the dismantling of generic forms of godlike correspondences. More and more, he becomes inspired by a metaphysics having to do with the rhetorical production of such correspondences, a rhetorical (or semiotic) generation of modernist forms that comes gradually to replace their classic and romantic counterparts.[599]

Certainly I would agree Stevens' move beyond the romantic *poesis* is 'inspired by a metaphysics', but I would argue that this manifests itself as a 'reduction of metaphysics' to *being*. This sense of *being* finds its closest parallel in the pre-Socratic poetic philosophy of the 'it is', where all polarities (including the religious imagination) are grounded in the immanence of the 'central mind' of the 'underworld'. Such thought appears to form Stevens' ground for moving out in new and 'modern' directions of re-creation. Nancy suggests that:

It is also in this sense that it might be said that the creation of the world is the thought of God. [We could say this] if from now on – given that the unconditioned is no longer subjected to the condition of the supreme being – it were not also necessary for us to think this without "God" and without a "creator".[600]

What is critical is that the conception of this thought, 'We say God and the imagination are one', is used to allow thought this power of 'creation'. It conceives of thinking/imagination as the opening of *being*, the very painting 'Out of' religious forms as concepts the imagination is saturated in:

[598] Wallace Stevens, 'Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 444.
[599] David R. Jarraway, 'Stevens and Belief', *The Cambridge Companion To Wallace Stevens*, p. 194.
[600] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p. 175.

It never stops happening – and surprising. Thinking never stops catching itself in the act [*se surprendre á*] of seeing it coming, its open look turned upon the transparency of nothing. A thought is an event: what it thinks happens to it there, where it is not. An event is a thought: the tension and leap into the nothing of Being. It is in this sense that "Being and thinking are the same" and that their sameness takes place according to the incisive ex-tension of ek-sistence.[601]

Nancy continues his discourse on the creation of the world as the thought of God:

[Since Hegel] at the very least – it might be necessary to pay some renewed attention to the work of Parmenides himself, particularly to how ontological truth is inscribed there in the recitation of an event. After all, the poem immediately opens onto the present with "the horses which carry me," where nothing indicates a stopping point in any formal way. In fact, the speaker's chariot enters the domain of the goddess, but this domain is only presented as the road opened wide by the gaping opening that Diké agreed to open. He, the "young man," the one who "knows" or "sees" his road "pass through all the cities," does not come down from his chariot. He is instructed by the goddess along the way, without stopping, instructed not about Being but about the "it is." Passing through the opening, he sees that there is; that is all that happens to him, and nothing else ever happens – when something happens.[602]

The 'immanence' of the 'it is' is characteristic of the ontological 'value' or nature of poetry. It is 'the poem' that 'immediately opens onto the present', without stopping. Its constant movement in opening the ground of poetry allows for the arising of infinite forms that 'pass through' 'the road opened wide', a connection well able to fuel modernism in its thirst to continually make it new. At the periphery of this modern reinterpretation of what resembles Parmenidean thought lies the machinery of religion and mysticism, but without the belief. The Parmenidean charioteer is the 'charioteer' *held* by the 'transport' of the 'it is', of the poetic imagination grounded in *being*, which of course includes physical reality. This provides a stark contrast to Stevens' critique of Plato's *imagined* charioteer of the flight of the soul, in 'The

[601] Ibid., p. 175.
[602] Ibid., pp. 175 - 176.

Noble Rider and the Sound of Words'.[603] For Stevens, romantic flights of the imagination are useless. Only with an imagination connected to the 'central mind' of *being* (through 'the sound of words') can 'unreal things have a reality of their own', in the 'transport' of the 'it is'.[604] 'Major man' is 'he' who 'knows', he who 'sees' immanence, the 'it is', as part of it. 'He' is the one who claims to be able to reconnect humanity to the 'one' and neutralize the *polemos* as a form of 'saviour'. But what would be the 'extension' of this 'major man'? What would 'major man', connected to the totality of 'being there', to immanence, which is 'enough', imagine for himself as his own mythology?

The Birth of a 'Supreme Fiction' - The Order of Religion and the Order of Poetry

The early Stevens wanted, needed, the central position that religion once filled, but could not believe in traditional religious forms. It is interesting to note that after encouraging Elsie to join the local church in 1907, saying that he was 'not in the least religious', but still 'very, very glad to know that you are now on the road', Stevens declared that: 'I say my prayers every night - not that I need them now, or that they are anything more than a habit, half-unconscious.'[605] The effort of much of Stevens' poetry would seem to be engaged with substituting the old religious forms with the fiction of poetry, while attempting to fulfil his very real need to 'believe', even though he knows he only believes a 'fiction'. The oft quoted entry from his *Adagia* confirms that: 'The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to

[603] Wallace Stevens, 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words', *The Necessary Angel, Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 643.
[604] Ibid., p. 644.
[605] A Letter to Elsie Moll, March 10th, 1907. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 96.

be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly.'[606]

When 'major man' is first mentioned by name in the 'Notes' his entrance can seem somewhat enigmatic, unless we trace 'his' origin from Stevens' first collection. The same could also be said of the 'supreme fiction'. From *Harmonium* there is evidence to suggest that Stevens was seeking to replace religion with poetry, as 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman' makes clear:

> Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.
> Take the moral law and make a nave of it
> And from the nave build haunted heaven. Thus,
> The conscience is converted into palms,
> Like windy citherns hankering for hymns.
> We agree in principle. That's clear. But take
> The opposing law and make a peristyle,
> And from the peristyle project a masque
> Beyond the planets. Thus, our bawdiness,
> Unpurged by epitaph, indulged at last,
> Is equally converted into palms,
> Squiggling like saxophones. And palm for palm,
> Madame, we are where we began.[607]

The conception that 'Oxidia' was born from the minds of humans is again apparent - 'Take the moral law and make a nave of it/ And from the nave build haunted heaven.' So too is the idea of projecting 'a masque/ Beyond the planets', which echoes Xenophanes, suggesting that the excesses of the 'gods' described by the poets arose from human minds. The artistic conception is to re-conceive, to 'make' and to 'project' from the old religious forms. Everything, including the paraphernalia of religion is eligible for remaking because it was only imagined in the first place. This includes the 'peristyle' of the 'opposing law' which reads as a substitution for the

[606] Wallace Stevens, 'Adagia', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 903.
[607] Wallace Stevens, 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 47.

old temple at Jerusalem with something closer to revelry and debauchery. To Stevens it simply doesn't matter, it all came from the imagination and as such it is poetry that is the 'supreme fiction'.

Milton J. Bates, in an essay entitled 'Stevens and the Supreme Fiction', argues that: '"A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" dramatizes the central insight in George Santayana's *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900), published while Stevens was a student at Harvard and spent time in Santayana's company.'[608] Lentricchia makes the point that 'the tendency of *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* is to argue from isolate sensibility to community, from poems as aids to perception to poems as aids to connection'.[609] In this work of Santayana's, Stevens would have read:

Beginning, however, with that zealous Protestant, the old Xenophanes, the austerer minds, moralists, naturalists, and wits, united in decrying the fanciful polytheism of the poets.[610]

Although Santayana suggests that Xenophanes' scepticism may seem 'unjust', or as 'hard denials' to 'our mind', he also says[611]:

But in their day the revolt of the sceptics had its relative justification. The imagination had dried up, and what had once been a natural interpretation of facts now seemed an artificial addition to them. An elaborate and irrelevant world of fiction seemed to have been imposed on human credulity. Mythology was, in fact, already largely irrelevant; the experience poetised by it had been forgotten and the symbol, in its significance, could not be honestly or usefully retained.[612]

In Stevens' view the Christian tradition had also 'dried up' as a product of the imagination. In fact, in a letter of 1953 Stevens describes himself as 'a dried-up

[608] Milton J. Bates, 'Stevens and the Supreme Fiction', *The Cambridge Companion To Wallace Stevens*, p. 49.
[609] Frank Lentricchia, *Modernist Quartet*, p. 6.
[610] George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, p. 39.
[611] Ibid., 39.
[612] Ibid., 39.

Presbyterian', using Santayana's precise terminology for describing Xenophanes' dilemma.[613] Santayana had said that:

We observe to-day a process exactly analogous to that by which the natural divinities of Greece were reduced again to the physical or social forces from which poetry had originally evoked their forms.[614]

It seems certain that Santayana was well positioned to contribute to Stevens' sense of philosophical 'poetry' as a substitute for religion with statements such as:

Judging other minds and other ages by our own, we are tempted to ask if there ever was any fundamental difference between religion and poetry.[615]

Or rhyming almost perfectly with Stevens: 'Our religion is the poetry in which we believe.'[616] However, although Santayana may have contributed the impetus to perform the transvaluation of poetry for religion, its model is reminiscent of that 'zealous Protestant', 'old Xenophanes'.[617] For the post-Nietzschean poet or philosopher, Xenophanes' ridicule of the polytheism of his age provided a means of substituting the religious imagination with the poetic.

Having once announced that 'poetry is the supreme fiction' in 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman', Stevens does not overtly name the 'supreme fiction' again until the title of the 'Notes'. However, the idea of substituting the order of religion with the order of poetry is very much at work in the interim period. For example, the concept of replacing religion with poetry continued to be evident in *Ideas of Order*. I argued earlier that in 'The Idea of Order at Key West' Stevens had appeared to view the order of poetry as extending from an inherent *technê*, personified as the singing 'she'. The act of writing a poem opened a connection to

[613] A Letter to Bernard Heringman, July 21st, 1953. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 792.
[614] George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, p. 42.
[615] Ibid., 19.
[616] Ibid., 20.
[617] Ibid., 39.

that fundamental 'order' that disclosed *being*. What becomes clear is that Stevens offered the order of poetry as a replacement for religion. In a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer in 1935, Stevens said that:

If poetry introduces order, and every competent poem introduces order, and if order means peace, even though that particular peace is an illusion, is it any less an illusion than a good many other things that everyone high and low now-a-days concedes to be no longer of any account?[618]

As Stevens had just been speaking of the poet as a 'metropolitan Rabbi', we can assume that the 'illusion' no longer of 'any account' is the old religious order that brings 'peace'. Poetry, connected to the inherent order can reconfigure reality. The order of poetry is no less an 'illusion' than the religious order for Stevens, but he sees the act of replacing the religious order as 'a freshening of life', 'a thing of consequence', a process that would 'change the status of the poet'.[619]

In a letter of April 9th 1907 to Elsie, Stevens recounts having been reading the "Note Books" of Matthew Arnold and 'a volume of lectures on Greek subjects' at the same time.[620] This letter was written nine days before deciding to throw his Bible away. One of the quotes that Stevens would have read in the *Notebooks* reads as follows, from the 1902 edition:

Christian virtue consists in *order*; that is, in letting every duty have its proper place and concern. To engage in other business before we acquit ourselves of this is to go against *order*; and all other virtues are useless.[621]

Certainly the language of a poem like 'The Idea of Order at Key West' implies a transvaluation of the established order. The phrase 'Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know', echoes God questioning Job in this context by saying: 'Tell Me, if you

[618] A Letter to Ronald Lane Latimer, November 5th, 1935. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 293.
[619] Ibid., p. 293.
[620] A Letter to Elsie Moll, April 9th, 1907. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 101.
[621] Matthew Arnold, *Matthew Arnold's Notebooks* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1902), p. 61.

know all this',[622] or, 'declare, if thou hast understanding'.[623] This questioning of Job was in the context of God asking Job where he was when God created all things. For Stevens, the 'Blessed rage for order' may be parodying what he perceives as God's 'rage' ('The maker's rage') for order, in asking Job approximately ninety questions out of the violence of the whirlwind, with respect to His creative (ordering) omnipotence over Job.

The Old King James version of the Bible renders from Job as follows: 'Canst thou bind the sweet influences of Pleiades'.[624] The 'sweet influences of Pleiades' would appear to have become the 'fragrant portals' of the night sky for Stevens, from which he intimates that we literally had our birth. The cosmos is now 'dimly-starred' and provides only 'ghostlier demarcations', because the 'truth' of the Darwinian inflected 'origins' (that he believes he has uncovered) is here a synthesis of the physical and the metaphysical. Jarraway seems accurate in suggesting that: '*Ideas of Order* focuses more on the substitution of God as a means of ultimately terminating metaphorical play.'[625] The phrases, 'voice of sky' and 'water-walled', appear to try and reduce images of the ancient Israelites at Mount Sinai and the exodus through the Red Sea to physical nature at hand.[626] The woman's song of *technê* at Key West is 'uttered word by word'[627] and seems to be offered as Stevens' replacement for 'The Word' (*Logos*) of God through Whom 'all things were made'.[628]

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[622] *The Holy Bible - New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998) Job 38:18, p. 469.
[623] *The Holy Bible* (Glasgow: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1954) Job 38:4, p. 499.
[624] Ibid., Job 38:31, p. 499.
[625] David R. Jarraway, 'Stevens and Belief', *The Cambridge Companion To Wallace Stevens*, p. 195.
[626] Wallace Stevens, 'The Idea of Order at Key West', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 105.
[627] Ibid., p. 105.
[628] *The Holy Bible* (Glasgow: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1954) John 1:3, p. 90.

For Stevens the universal order of *technê* includes the religious order, not the other way around. Arnold's 'Dover Beach' had announced the receding belief in God. The Key West poem not only proposes an alternative to 'The Word' that sustains the universe in the form of the woman's song of *technê* from 'beyond' physical nature, but it also claims to be a *poesis* that is grounded in that new 'song'. I would argue that this is Stevens' 'supreme fiction' in embryo. The supremacy of the 'supreme fiction' is based upon grounding the new *poesis* in the woman's 'song', which had united both the imagination *and* reality. This is superior for the Xenophanean Stevens, because he believes religion is only a product of the imagination, *derived* from the physical. As subsequent poems will show, it is a fiction that launches (is 'flicked') from the ground of the imagination and reality as a 'oneness' that constitutes Stevens' conception of the 'supreme fiction'.

'Notes Toward' the 'Supreme Fiction'

The idea of poetry as a 'supreme fiction' that could replace religion had been evident since *Harmonium*. The concept itself would seem to have taken a trial run in 'The Idea of Order at Key West'. Here it was the idea of poetry being written out of a 'song' that united the imagination and reality, or a fiction derived from 'real reality', that could conceptually negate God as the ground for an extant 'creation'. In his definition of the cosmic scope of *phusis* Heidegger had included 'the gods who themselves stand under destiny.'[629] I argued earlier that the singer at Key West was 'Ananke' ('Necesity') who incorporated the 'more than that' in *phusis* (*technê*) that ordered the seasons. It is from this totalizing song of everything subject to the fictional figure of 'destiny' that Stevens can build the 'supreme fiction' as a ground

[629] Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 16.

that includes the imagination (religious or otherwise) and reality. With the advent of 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', Stevens takes a significant step in developing the 'supreme fiction', hence it is not that fiction fully realised, rather it is 'toward' it, as something like the *enactment* of *the pure Necessity of belief*, derived from the unity of the imagination and reality. What I want to pursue here is the development of the idea of producing a fiction out of a fiction, which has already united the imagination and reality, as the criteria for the 'supreme fiction' that could consume the religious imagination.

Close analysis of the 'Notes' allows for an argument that suggests that significant portions of the three main sections of 'It Must be Abstract', 'It Must Change' and 'It Must Give Pleasure', can be interpreted as a renewal of a previously written poem. Each conscious renewal can be read as a 'meta-poetry', attempting to produce the 'supreme fiction' that would replace what I have called the Xenophanean interpretation of religion. Essentially, the prospective idea of a 'supreme fiction' could now begin to walk about upon the stage constructed in 'Of Modern Poetry', which is the single stage of the imagination and reality *played* together as one 'stage', that includes the audience. By the term 'meta-poetry' I mean a poetry consciously written out of existing poetry, in a way that views the original poem as able to provide a *ground* of origin unique to poetry and distinct from the extant world at hand, which is precisely what his essay entitled 'Imagination as Value' implies.[630] Instead of a lion imagining a lion 'deity', Stevens *could* be read here as imagining a poem out of an existing poem (that has already played the imagination and reality together) in an effort to radically displace the ground of religion, the

[630] Wallace Stevens, 'Imagination as Value', *The Necessary Angel, Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 724.

ground of a pre-given creation. The replacement is a ground of *mythos* that suggests that all appearances, be they real or fictive, are 'true' by virtue of their status of 'in *being*'. I am not suggesting that a conscious presentation of these mechanics amounts to a fully fledged 'system' for Stevens. In view of that consideration I will restrain my remarks to an *interesting parallel* with a view to analyzing the language of a select few, key poems, to demonstrate the mechanics of a possible 'supreme fiction' and to comment on what it may imply.

We can begin by noting poem III of 'It Must be Abstract', which speaks of the poem refreshing life, of thought:

> Beating in the heart, as if blood newly came,
> An elixir, an excitation, a pure power.[631]

This may be compared to lines from 'Poetry is a Destructive Force' that speak of 'A lion, an ox in his breast'… 'He tastes its blood'….'In the body of a violent beast'.[632] Poem VII of 'It Must be Abstract' notes that:

> We more than awaken, sit on the edge of sleep,
> As on an elevation, and behold.[633]

This can be read as a reworking of earlier lines from 'The Latest Freed Man':

> For a moment on rising, at the edge of the bed, to be,
> To have the ant of the self changed to an ox.[634]

Poem II from 'It Must Change' carries the lines:

> does
> The body lift its heavy wing, take up,
>
> Again, an inexhaustible being, rise
> Over the loftiest antagonist
> To drone the green phrases of its juvenal?[635]

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[631] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 331.
[632] Wallace Stevens, 'Poetry is a Destructive Force', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 178.
[633] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 334.
[634] Wallace Stevens, 'The Latest Freed Man', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 187.
[635] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 337.

It also speaks of 'barefoot servants' who 'adjust/ The curtains to a metaphysical t'[636] which together are reminiscent of 'The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician' which had referred to: 'the drifting of these curtains/ Is full of long motions' and 'the firmament,/ Up-rising and down-falling, bares/ The last largeness, bold to see.'[637]

Poem IX of 'It Must Change' may be seen as self referential of the process Stevens seems to be enacting:

> The poem goes from the poet's gibberish to
> The gibberish of the vulgate and back again.[638]

It could also be read as a reworking of 'Blue Guitar' poem XXII:

> Poetry is the subject of the poem,
> From this the poem issues and
>
> To this returns.[639]

From 'It Must Give Pleasure' we could point to the following from poem IX:

> round and round, the merely going round,
> Until merely going round is a final good.[640]

This would appear to be a reworking of 'The Pleasures of Merely Circulating':

> The garden flew round with the angel,
> The angel flew round with the clouds[641]

Further, poem X as a reworking of 'Anatomy of Monotony': 'Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night'…. 'Bent over work, anxious, content, alone'[642], which compares to the earlier poem with: 'She walks an autumn ampler than the wind'…. 'over the bare spaces of our skies/ She sees a barer sky that does not bend.'[643]

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[636] Ibid., 337.
[637] Wallace Stevens, 'The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 49.
[638] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 342.
[639] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 144.
[640] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 350.
[641] Wallace Stevens, 'The Pleasures of Merely Circulating', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 120.
[642] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 351.
[643] Wallace Stevens, 'Anatomy of Monotony', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 90.

When I say it 'compares' I don't mean it simply mimics or pays homage to the earlier poem, as Robert Lowell may be said to imitate Elisabeth Bishop in 'Skunk Hour'. Rather, I am suggesting that Stevens is using the original poem in which the 'imagination' and 'reality' had been forged together as a fundamental ground of *mythos*, as the fiction of a 'whole', from which to establish new fictions that attempt to free themselves from the pre-existent, created ground that implies a creator God. If we had to point to a model that Stevens is mimicking, I would suggest the New Testament's prolific use of Old Testament scriptures, in the sense of building upon a solid foundation of truth. This would be in line with Stevens' conscious effort to debunk religion as just another poetry in his Xenophanean mode. The point is that the 'Notes' can be read as a meta-poetry, by which I mean a poetry consciously grounded in existing poetry and propelled by the ontological urgency of the 'it must' ('It Must Be Abstract' etc).[644] In Heidegger and Gadamer's sense, as well as in the sense that Nancy attributes to Parmenides' ontological poetry, this is an opening of *being* grounded in an opening of *being*. Poetry, as opening becomes an endless opening of fiction, particularly if we give extended license to 'fiction' and say with Stevens that: 'What we see in the mind is as real to us as what we see by the eye.'[645] As in 'Of Modern Poetry', which itself re-enacts the terms of 'Blue Guitar', 'all the world's a stage', and it is upon that 'stage' that the 'supreme fiction' seems to be founded.[646] If this approach warrants a more contemporary label, that label is surely 'modernism' as a part of the epoch opened after Kant.

Indeed, not only is the entire idea for 'Notes' as 'toward' a 'supreme fiction' rooted in the *Harmonium* poem 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman', but we

[644] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 329.
[645] Wallace Stevens, 'Adagia', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 903.
[646] William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, *The Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare*, p. 205. Act II, Scene II.

should recall that at one stage Stevens intended calling *Harmonium - The Grand Poem: Preliminary Minutiae*. 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' pays homage to that rejected title. With reference to Stevens' dissatisfaction with the poems of his early period, Lentricchia interprets that:

> the aborted purposes of his "horrid cocoons" (his metaphor for his earlier poems) might somehow still be redeemed, the miscarried insects reimplanted in the nourishing environment of a longer meditative form, so that their potential might finally emerge.[647]

Lentricchia seems correct to consider this reimplanting as connected to the dramatic transformation of Stevens' earlier 'trifling poesies' to a 'missal', but completely incorrect in not considering that the idea for 'poetry' as 'the supreme fiction' began with *Harmonium*, and that Stevens *never stopped* renewing poetry as his re-composition of 'Credences' through 'The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain' shows.[648] On the contrary, reimplanting and re-composition are the refreshing of the 'first idea', as the ontological ground of a fiction derived from the unity of the imagination and reality for Stevens. Lentricchia's disconnect occurs in viewing Stevens' in cultural terms, failing to see that ontological thought claims to have no cultural ground.

Whereas Lentricchia is correct to maintain that: 'Stevens was one of those writers who find their old things just old', he comes unstuck by trying to suggest that Stevens also found his earlier poems 'psychically unprofitable to reencounter.'[649] Rather, Stevens, the modern artist standing in 'the metaphysical streets' says[650]:

> To re-create, to use
>
> The cold and earliness and bright origin

[647] Frank Lentricchia, *Modernist Quartet*, p. 159.
[648] Wallace Stevens, 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 47.
[649] Frank Lentricchia, *Modernist Quartet*, p. 148.
[650] Wallace Stevens, 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 403.

Is to search.[651]

'To recreate' and 'to use' is to reencounter. Stevens consistently maintained artistic integrity in the process of literally rearranging earlier poems. The 'Notes' had declared that: 'The poem refreshes life', it 'sends us' back to the 'immaculate beginning'.[652] As a recreation of the earlier poetry, 'Notes' could equally send us back to the 'bright origin', the 'candor' of the 'first idea', which is an ontological ground opened by those original poems.[653] The project was proposed from the beginning and what becomes old is still always part of the 'rock', only in need of recomposing to awaken the 'first idea'. Renewal and refreshing make poetry a continually living thing. Patke draws attention to a statement by Marianne Moore from *The Harvard Advocate centennial Anthology* of 1940 where she says of Stevens that: 'The interacting veins of life between his early and later poems are an ever-continuing marvel to me.'[654] The term 'early' is relative, because Stevens renewed poems of his middle and later period as well, so does not signify a desire to just renew his initial efforts. This is not about a glutinous lust to consume things for the sake of collecting them rather it is an ontological *desire* ('it must') for the refreshing of the 'first idea', for the completion of the mind. It is entirely detached from the possession of a 'thing', which is merely symptomatic of a metaphysical desire which runs deeper than all modes of physical completion through possession.

The blend of ontology, poetry and mythology found in the pre-Socratics, offered post-Nietzschean philosophers and poets a conceptual *archê* from which a new fiction could be perpetually renewed. For Stevens as a modern poet, there is no

[651] Ibid., p. 411.
[652] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 330 - 331.
[653] Ibid., pp. 330 - 331.
[654] Rajeev S. Patke, *The Long Poems of Wallace Stevens – An Interpretive Study*, p. 233.

ultimate ‘Truth’, no ‘The the’.[655] There is only *being* at hand compelled by the ‘it must’ as it establishes the ‘it is’ of the new fiction. What the pre-Socratics offered was a ground that made ‘belief’ and ‘truth’ perpetual inconstancies in need of being *made* anew. In this sense the poems of ‘Notes’ enact the abstraction and change of their own poetically constructed ‘reality’, that is justified merely by coming into *being*, and which results in ‘pleasure’. They are what they are speaking of in a sense that universalises poetry to something like Gadamer’s ‘universal hermeneutics’. For modernism to retain its label it has to continually fashion new fictions, and the ‘Notes’ can be read as an effort to extend that possibility infinitely. What we will observe in Stevens as we progress in this analysis, is that the sense of the total connection between old and new poems gradually becomes one universalising poem, that is conscious of all poetry, all fictions, issuing from a single ground of the opening of *being*.

The Meta-Poetry of the ‘Rock’ as the ‘Supreme Fiction’

We noted earlier that Stevens had written that ‘a poem in which the poet has chosen for his subject a philosophic theme should result in the poem of poems. That the wing of poetry should also be the rushing wing of meaning seems to be an extreme aesthetic good’.[656] In looking back, ‘Notes’ can be read as the achievement of that ‘extreme aesthetic good’, with the ‘philosophic theme’ resulting in ‘the poem of poems’. Arnold's *Notebooks* record a quote from Strauss as follows:

None but a book-student could ever imagine that a creation of the brain, woven of poetry and philosophy, can take the place of real religion.[657]

[655] Wallace Stevens, ‘The Man on the Dump’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 186.
[656] Wallace Stevens, ‘A Collect of Philosophy’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 854.
[657] Matthew Arnold, *Matthew Arnold’s Notebooks*, p. 95.

Though such a comment is only indicative of the attitude that Stevens was looking to repost, I would argue that the 'Notes' can be read as Stevens' answer to such a challenge to replace religion.

When Stevens fully realised his conception of the 'rock' in 'Credences of Summer', we can argue that he had found his *ground* for attempting to replace God. 'The Rock' is a title of Christ and by using that title Stevens could be read as attempting to replace Christ The Rock, as 'The Word' through Whom all things were created, with his fusion of the physical and the metaphysical as 'immanent' 'reality'. In terms of the Christian religion we may think of Peter (*petros* - 'stone'/'rock') in this context, but 'The Rock' is a title of Christ and Stevens, who as a child would fall asleep to the sound of his mother reading the Bible, is attempting a more fundamental subversion of religion than just the replacement of a man:

> *Behold, I lay in Zion a*
> *stumbling stone and rock of*
> *offense,*
> *and whosoever believes on Him*
> *will not be put to shame.*[658]

The same characteristics are applied to The Lord spoken of in the Psalms, which Stevens recalls reading in a letter of 1909[659]:

> For you *are* my rock and my
> Fortress.[660]

This section of scripture has the title, 'God the Rock of Salvation' and I would argue that it is this title of God's that Stevens attempts to reconstruct on his own terms. This becomes certain when we note that Stevens refers to his 'rock' in section III of 'Credences of Summer', as a 'natural tower' and a 'refuge'[661], which echoes the

[658] *The Holy Bible - New King James Version*, Romans 9:33, p. 996.
[659] A Letter to Elsie Moll, May 3rd, 1909. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 141.
[660] *The Holy Bible - New King James Version*, Psalm 71:3, p. 509.
[661] Wallace Stevens, 'Credences of Summer', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 323.

Psalmist frequently referring to God as 'a strong tower' and 'my refuge', in context of 'the rock of my strength'.[662] There seems to be little doubt that when Stevens initially climbed upon the 'rock', for its status of being 'away from the much of the land'[663], he was consciously inverting King David's request to God to lift him 'out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock'.[664]

The 'transport' of *Transport to Summer* ultimately seemed to be the 'transport' of 'overwhelmingly strong emotions'.[665] This kind of 'transport' as a euphoric experience of the 'rock' has the characteristics of a replacement of 'religious' emotion in 'Credences of Summer'. 'Credences' is a word usually taken at face value, literally as creeds of summer. Vendler relates that: '*Credences of Summer*, as its title betrays, is the creed of the believer'.[666] This is indeed one meaning, but its more obscure meaning is that of 'credence': 'A small side table, shelf, or niche in a church for holding the elements of the Eucharist before they are consecrated.'[667] The act of taking nature to his body in 'Poetry is a Destructive Force' produced blood in Stevens' mouth, literally a Communion with nature. 'Notes', in what I am calling its Xenophanean looking transvaluation of the religious imagination with poetry, had done its work. 'Credences' is a euphoric experience of the immanence of the 'rock' of the physical and the metaphysical in its *being* at hand. In 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven', collected in *Auroras*, Stevens states that: 'We seek/ Nothing beyond reality. Within it,/ Everything'.[668] Through the

[662] *The Holy Bible* (Glasgow: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1958) Psalms 61:3 & 62:7, p. 519.
[663] Wallace Stevens, 'How To Live. What To Do', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 103.
[664] *The Holy Bible - New King James Version*, Psalms 40:2, p. 493.
[665] Judy Pearsall, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, p. 1524.
[666] Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings – Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems*, p. 234.
[667] Judy Pearsall, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, p. 335.
[668] Wallace Stevens, 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 402.

protagonist, 'Professor Eucalyptus', Stevens implies the level of import attached to this seeking: '"The search for reality is as momentous as/ The search for God."'[669]

The 'without a drop of blood' that came at the end of 'Repetitions of a Young Captain' signalled the 'credences', or small tables, that would hold up the bread and wine of 'reality' in a sense that resembles Hölderlin.[670] The height of the 'tower', the 'apogee' of 'green', the 'limits of reality', the 'hay', 'piled in mows' and the 'rock', are all indications of this raised platform, offering up the 'holy' bread and wine of 'reality' itself. The point is that Stevens has transvalued these religious icons with the physical and the metaphysical of the 'rock', bound in the *poesis*, which is reminiscent of Parmenides' configuration of 'reality' as the 'it is':

> And happiest folk-land, mostly marriage-hymns.
> It is the mountain on which the tower stands,
> It is the final mountain. Here the sun,
> Sleepless, inhales his proper air, and rests.
> This is the refuge that the end creates.[671]

The sun 'rests' and 'inhales his proper air' because it was to the 'underworld' that the Greeks believed the sun went each night and where all polarities were unified. The repetition of 'It is' echoes Parmenides and in context of Parmenides Nancy says:

What meaning, then? The meaning that makes it the case that "there is"; that which destines or provokes Being into happening; that which sends Being on its way into happening – into happening/arriving/leaving. What is this? This cannot be represented as an axiom, or as a fact. It will be said that it is an "it must."[672]

The urgency of the 'it must' is comparable to a *poesis* and is strongly evident in Stevens' 'transport' of the 'refuge' that 'the end creates':

> It must
> Be the finding of a satisfaction, and may
> Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman

[669] Ibid., p. 410.
[670] Wallace Stevens, 'Repetitions of a Young Captain', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 274.
[671] Wallace Stevens, 'Credences of Summer', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 323.
[672] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p. 176.

Combing.[673]

'It must' says Stevens. 'It Must be Abstract', 'It Must Change', 'It Must Give Pleasure'. In the case of 'Of Modern Poetry', the 'it must' is an 'immanence' that immediately opens onto what I earlier said were modes of *becoming*.

For Gadamer in his essay entitled 'On the contribution of poetry to the search for truth', it is the term 'nearness' that closely resembles such 'immanence'.[674] Its connective power in the opening of the poem allows for what Gadamer, like Heidegger, and ultimately Parmenides, called *aletheia*, which Gadamer defines as "openness".[675] It is this power of poetic language to open this 'truth' that leads Gadamer to see 'nearness' as a reductive force, *being*:

> This standing and this nearness find permanence in the language of literature and, most perfectly, in the poem. This is not a romantic theory, but a straightforward description of the fact that language gives all of us our access to a world in which certain special forms of human experience arise: the religious tidings that proclaim salvation, the legal judgement that tells us what is right and what is wrong in our society, the poetic world that by being there bears witness to our own being.[676]

For Gadamer, this process is like a mirror held up to 'this nearness or familiarity itself in which we stand'.[677]

Stevens' poetic language establishes a 'final mountain' founded upon 'nothing'. Together, this presence/absence dynamic is the ground of *being*, the 'transport' of the movement from the 'it must' to the 'it is'. Gadamer suggests that:

> The truth of poetry consists in creating a "hold upon nearness." What this hold upon nearness means becomes clear if we consider a counterexample. Wherever we feel something lacking in a poem, then it is because it is not a structure that hangs together. It jars because it contains something merely conventional or stale. A

[673] Wallace Stevens, 'Of Modern Poetry', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 219.
[674] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. by Robert Bernasconi, trans. by Nicholas Walker (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.114.
[675] Ibid., p. 108.
[676] Ibid., p. 115.
[677] Ibid., p. 115.

genuine poem, on the other hand, allows us to experience "nearness" in such a way that this nearness is held in and through the linguistic form of the poem.[678]

Stevens was obviously aware of how a 'jar' could inhibit 'nearness' to nature.[679]

Here however, the result of such 'nearness' to the 'rock' is that:

> Things stop in that direction and since they stop
> The direction stops and we accept what is
> As good. The utmost must be good and is[680]

Gadamer suggests that:

the poem does not fade, for the poetic word brings the transience of time to a standstill. It too "stands written, not as a promise, nor as a pledge, but as a saying where its own presence is in play. Perhaps it is connected with the power of the poetic word that the poet feels a challenge to bring to language that which seems most closed to the realm of words.[681]

Stevens' language of the 'rock', his collected poems described as a 'planet on the table', all point to an absolute 'hold upon nearness', that here is experienced as 'transport'.[682]

> And the secondary senses of the ear
> Swarm, not with secondary sounds, but choirs,
> Not evocations but last choirs, last sounds
> With nothing else compounded, carried full,
> Pure rhetoric of a language without words.[683]

This 'Pure rhetoric', that is 'without words' is what 'seems most closed to the realm of words'. It is a sense of *being*. The ear is swarming, not with 'secondary sounds', but with another replacement for 'holiness' or 'worship', 'choirs', the 'choirs' of 'real reality', evoked as 'holy', the mere *being* of 'Creations of Sound', that here too is a constant rhetoric 'without words'.

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[678] Ibid., pp. 113 - 114.
[679] Wallace Stevens, 'Anecdote of the Jar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 60 - 61.
[680] Wallace Stevens, 'Credences of Summer', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 324.
[681] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, p. 114.
[682] Wallace Stevens, 'The Planet on the Table', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 450.
[683] Wallace Stevens, 'Credences of Summer', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 323 - 324.

The ‘rock’ and the poem are ‘compounded’, the senses of the rational self are ‘secondary’ and as with the ‘end’, these are ‘last’ choirs, ‘last sounds’ on the edge of ‘nothing’. Stevens’ language is collapsing into a ‘Pure rhetoric’, a rhapsody of ‘it is’, aligned with the *poesis*. For Stevens, the ‘rock’ comprises both summer and the *poesis*, reduced to one thing in the ‘reduction of metaphysics’ to the ‘it is’:

> The rock cannot be broken. It is the truth.
> It rises from land and sea and covers them.
> It is a mountain half way green and then,
> The other immeasurable half, such rock
> As placid air becomes. But it is not
>
> A hermit's truth nor symbol in hermitage.
> It is the visible rock, the audible,
> The brilliant mercy of a sure repose,
> On this present ground, the vividest repose,
> Things certain sustaining us in certainty.
>
> It is the rock of summer, the extreme,
> A mountain luminous half-way in bloom
> And then half way in the extremest light
> Of sapphires flashing from the central sky,
> As if twelve princes sat before a king.[684]

The language and form of this canto can be read as wholly enacting the unity of the visible and the invisible that it is describing. The strength of the assonance of 'the rock cannot be broken' in binding the separate words into each other, aurally establish a sense of the fullness of this rock of summer, the ripeness of a natural and creative fulfilment as Gadamer had described. Its status as 'truth' demonstrates Stevens’ belief in its worthiness as a reality that can replace religious 'truth'. This much is obvious from the open terms of the poem and the ground that establishes this unity is not realized as mere alliteration. Rather, the oneness is performed by the act of opening a poetry that is conscious of establishing itself as connected to the ontological. The fullness of this physical ‘rock’ is expressed because it includes the

[684] Ibid., pp. 324 - 325.

invisible, its 'other immeasurable half' that is 'such rock as placid air becomes'. The invisible half of the ‘rock’ is becoming 'the visible rock' in Stevens' *poesis* of the 'is', an underlying 'is' evoking a sense of 'Things certain sustaining us in certainty'. This would sound like religious language in its talk of a merciful sustainer, but it is merely religious language applied to the visible and the invisible at hand, in an effort to transvalue the religious as a facet of the imagination.

The word 'repose' that Stevens repeats is key for the 'supreme fiction', as it can mean to 'pose again', to move, or 'repose' in the sense of staying still, or resting. It is the paradoxical static movement of the 'it must' of *being*. 'Truth' in Stevens' terms is the visible containing the invisible, as a totality. The lens of art is depicted as being able to bring us into that view, that perspective, by an enframing of both imagined and real things. Art in this sense is not passive; it is an action, the ‘play’ of which is re-awoken for a fresh opening of *being* every time it encounters its audience that completes it. Just as it is an 'end', just as it is a 'limit', just as it is 'last', so here too it is 'the extreme', the limit of reality, the edge of the fullness of summer, of all things. Kingsley says of the fullness of Parmenides’ conception of the ‘it is’ that: ‘That limit, so elusive, is the rock of our existence.’[685]

Again the language creates the presence/absence dynamic by establishing a 'mountain' that is partly intangible, 'luminous' and 'flashing', containing the 'fires' sounded by the use of 'sapphires' (just as the ‘hay’ in ‘Oley’ was ‘Baked’ at the same ‘center’).[686] This 'half-way' is located in the 'central sky' where presence and absence meet in the work of art. The imagery takes us back to the ‘underworld’, inside the volcano where the fires of the night sky burned as all paradoxes met in absolute

[685] Peter Kingsley, *Reality*, p. 283.
[686] Wallace Stevens, ‘Credences of Summer’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 323.

‘oneness’. To ‘Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky’ is really to ‘Trace’ the ‘oneness’ of this central ground.[687] It remembers the moment at ‘Key West’ when the ‘lights in the fishing boats’ fused with the ‘fiery poles’ of the night sky as it ‘descended’, according to precisely the same ‘underworld’ ‘logic’.[688] This meeting of presence and absence in ‘Credences’ is akin to a royal audience for Stevens, with twelve princes sitting before a king, perhaps an image of the twelve Apostles judging the twelve tribes of Israel in the presence of God. The effort of Stevens' language appears to be engaged with grounding the physical and the metaphysical in the oneness of a *poesis*. Such a reduction includes religious images, from which new universal and totalized ground Stevens can construct new fictions infinitely, on the basis of that re-composition through art.

In the poems that comprise *The Rock* (1954) and the late poems, Stevens puts the ‘rock’ of the physical and the metaphysical to work. Its objective would appear to have been to replace the Biblical sense of 'The Rock' as ‘The Word’ through whom all things were created, and continue the programme set out in 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman'. In this sense 'The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain' can be read as an example of the 'supreme fiction' fully realised. As a remembrance of ‘Credences’, ‘The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain’ is a poem written out of earlier poetry, and in Stevens’ sense, it is wholly comprised of the ‘rock’, which together constitutes Stevens’ replacement for religion, the ‘supreme fiction’:

> There it was, word for word,
> The poem that took the place of a mountain.
>
> He breathed its oxygen,
> Even when the book lay turned in the dust of his table.

[687] Ibid., p. 322.
[688] Wallace Stevens, ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 106.

It reminded him how he had needed
A place to go to in his own direction,

How he had recomposed the pines,
Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds,

For the outlook that would be right,
Where he would be complete in an unexplained completion:

The exact rock where his inexactness
Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had
edged,

Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,
Recognize his unique and solitary home.[689]

'Word for word' implies a substitution of God with the *poesis* of the 'rock'. 'The Word' is a title of Christ, and Stevens is certainly aware of a departure from religion to a move in 'his own direction', perhaps towards the Heraclitean 'Word' or *Logos* of fundamental 'flux'.[690] It is an artistry, a re-composition (in Gadamer's sense of 'play') that is purportedly 'curing', recalibrating the ground of 'truth' in the 'immanence' in which the poet is completely consumed. For Stevens, this is 'exact' 'completion' that cures his 'inexactness'. It is where he could 'lie', which could imply comfortably resting in a fiction, on the supposition that all appearing is fiction.

The creation of poetry out of poetry in the form of the 'rock', could be seen to explain the Xenophanian textual play on 'oxygen', the mere mention of which switches Stevens' into the mode of transvaluing traditional religious belief with his own poetry bound to ontology. The 'ox' can be read as the compounding of the oneness of nature, including the projected Xenophanean looking deity. We will recall that Xenephones had referred to oxen *painting* their 'deities' in their own

[689] Wallace Stevens, 'The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 435.
[690] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 132.

image and also that Costello had said the poem was reminiscent of Cézanne. Echoing Xenophanes, Stevens had said in an early draft of 'Owl's Clover' that 'It was a mistake to paint the gods.'[691] Even when the poem, 'Credences of Summer', recorded in a book (*Transport to Summer*) is turned in the dust of his table, the memory of the experience lives on, providing inspiration for this poem as its *renewal* – the universalizing, reductive sway of this 'supreme fiction'. 'The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain' seems to be a complete example of the 'supreme fiction' because it creates and renews a poetry out of poetry as the 'rock', a model signalled with the intoning of what strongly resembles the Xenophanean 'ox'.

The poem called 'The Rock' is of course another survey of Stevens' 'rock', with which I would argue he is proposing to replace Christ The Rock. It appears to be another example of the 'supreme fiction' because it is actively written out from the ground of the 'rock' of the physical and the metaphysical, forged in the earlier poem, 'Credences'. In the second poem, Stevens returns to the theme of transplanting religion with his sense of the 'rock':

The Poem as Icon

> It is not enough to cover the rock with leaves.
> We must be cured of it by a cure of the ground
> Or a cure of ourselves, that is equal to a cure
>
> Of the ground, a cure beyond forgetfulness.[692]

'A cure beyond forgetfulness' only comes for Stevens when poetry is a 'planet on the table', of which we are 'part'.[693] The title suggests that the poem is an 'icon', with the word icon carrying the sense of an image as well as the sense of a religious

[691] Wallace Stevens, 'Owl's Clover', *Opus Posthumous* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 88.
[692] Wallace Stevens, 'The Rock', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 446.
[693] Wallace Stevens, 'The Planet on the Table', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 450.

icon that literally grows out of nature in Xenophanes' sense. The suggestion appears to be that a poetic image and a religious image are both products of the imagination. It is not enough to cover the 'rock' with a fiction derived from nature in the form of leaves, not enough to make 'rubbings of reality' as Stevens had suggested Carlos Williams was prone to doing.[694] Such a relation to the 'rock' does not go deep enough for Stevens. A deeper transvaluation at the ontological level is required.

The leaves that are at once the poetic and the religious imagination recall the palms from 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman':

> Thus, our bawdiness,
> Unpurged by epitaph, indulged at last,
> Is equally converted into palms[695]

The 'unpurged' 'bawdiness' of the poem becomes a palm which is suggested to be equal to the religious image of the palm, which itself needs to be purged. Stevens continues by implying that we need to be cured of religious fictions by a cure of the ground or ourselves. The cure of ourselves is proposed as 'equal' to the cure of the ground, which is suggestive of humanity being 'equal' to the 'ground' in a reductive sense. The word 'ground' carries a sense of *archê* or 'first beginning' as well. For Stevens, in a way that mirrors Gadamer's sense of 'play', it would seem that poetry is the means of opening this cure, this connecting of mind and world in the 'candor' of the poem. In his *Adagia* Stevens had said that: 'Poetry is a cure of the mind.'[696] The 'play' of poetry recalibrates our *being* for Gadamer as a post-Kantian.

Stevens continues with:

> And yet the leaves, if they broke into bud,
> If they broke into bloom, if they bore fruit,

[694] Wallace Stevens, 'Rubbings of Reality', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 815.
[695] Wallace Stevens, 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 47.
[696] Wallace Stevens, 'Adagia', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 913.

And if we ate the incipient colorings
Of their fresh culls might be a cure of the ground.[697]

This would seem to advocate the production of new fictions out of existing fictions, be they religious, romantic or poetic. I would argue that 'Notes' was the budding of Stevens' earlier poetry in an effort to displace the ground of what looked like the Xenophanean religious imagination. This is itself a form reminiscent of religion if one recalls the budding of Aaron's rod, the budding of a dead stick that yielded ripe almonds.[698] The inference appears to be that if we eat of these poems made anew, constructed in new colours, freshly picked, they might cure the ground of our *being* from what Stevens sees as strictures. Stevens appears to be blending the artistic sense of picking and selecting new colours ('fresh culls') for a work of art, with the idea of eating of forbidden fruit. The word 'culls' evokes the Biblical record of the 'tree of the knowledge of good and evil' where God warns mankind not to eat of its fruit, because in the day that they do, they will surely die.

For Stevens, it would seem, remaking a poem out of an existing poem may 'be a cure of the ground', may cure us of the religious imagination, or any imagined thing we allow to be 'The the', by letting humanity create its own fictitious 'ground' from which to build new fictions. It won't imagine gods out of the physical 'leaves' (nature), but instead will make new fictions out of the 'oneness' of the physical and the metaphysical combined in mere *being*. Its palette for painting these new fictions includes the earth, the man and the imagination as one palette of a totalized 'immanence' from which to paint, its possibilities being 'a thousand things'.[699] I

[697] Wallace Stevens, 'The Rock', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 446.
[698] *The Holy Bible - New King James Version*, Numbers 17:8, p. 135.
[699] Ibid., p. 447.

would argue that the poem itself, with its arising out of the 'rock' of 'Credences' is another example of the 'supreme fiction' fully realized.

According to Kingsley, Parmenides was called a *physikos*, which is the origin of the word 'physicist'.[700] Kingsley argues that when applied to Parmenides the term *physikos* means both: "someone who's interested in the beginnings and the nature of the universe. But it's also the origin of the English 'physician': it could be a way of referring to doctors or healers, as well."[701] Parmenides' mode of 'healing' was bringing the 'knowledge' of *being* back to the world in a poetry of connection. Empedocles, that other poetic philosopher of the 'one' who legend reported had returned from the fiery volcano, had written: 'Friends, that inhabit the great town looking down on the yellow rock of Akragas…I go about among you an immortal god'.[702] Further, he had decreed that they 'beg to hear from me the word of healing.'[703] Bloom notes that Hillis Miller believes that Stevens' sense of 'cure' was as 'a caring for the ground, a securing of it, making it solid, as one cures a fiberglass hull by drying it carefully.'[704] This provides an interesting image of Stevens meticulously drying out 'damp' romanticism with its anthropomorphic presentation of a litany of deities. Bloom says that: 'A cure of the rock is a cure of one's own reductiveness and, with it, freedom to have a larger idea of what it is to be wholly human.'[705]

I would consider the concept of 'cure' as forming a strong parallel with Empedocles, as the model of philosopher, poet, healer and 'saviour', returning from the purgatory fires of the 'underworld' having internalized the knowledge that all

[700] Peter Kingsley, *In The Dark Places of Wisdom*, p. 141.
[701] Ibid., p. 141.
[702] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, pp. 221 - 222.
[703] Ibid., p. 222.
[704] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, p. 346.
[705] Ibid., p. 346.

things are conceptually ‘one’. When Stevens first unveiled his complete ‘rock’ in ‘Credences’, his vision was to ‘see it with the hottest fire of sight’ and to ‘Burn everything not part of it to ash’, perhaps remembering the Empedoclean notion of ‘cure’, by which he seems to mean a fiery ‘cure’ of fantasia of every description that is not *seen* to be *grounded* in complete ‘reality’, located at the ‘centre’.[706] When Stevens first climbed his ‘rock’, he describes it as situated in a ‘world unpurged’, presumably of religious concepts.[707] The Empedoclean allusions may be being filtered through the common local practice of ‘fire-curing’ tobacco used in Connecticut.

By the time Stevens wrote the very late poem, 'Of Mere Being', the physical and the metaphysical as the ‘rock’ had long since become the *archê*, which for Stevens, consumed religion. We suggested earlier that the phoenix in the palm could be read as representing the metaphysical, and the leaves of the palm tree that resembled the dangling feathers, represented the physical. This seems to be the composition of the ‘rock’ for Stevens, and I would argue that the poem is another example of the 'supreme fiction' fully realized. The ‘rock’ as the physical and the metaphysical is envisioned as a phoenix in a palm tree here. Palms live for many years, grow very tall and are evergreen. Stevens can be read as using the ‘palm’ because it is a symbol of perpetual return (as is the ‘phoenix’) that is connected to religious imagery, much like his use of the word ‘rock’. Both are the physical and the metaphysical reduced to the oneness of a *poesis*. Arguably this palm tree has a textual link to *Harmonium* and the palms referenced in 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman', which are like the ‘cloudy palm/ Remote on heaven’s hill’, from ‘Sunday

[706] Wallace Stevens, ‘The Rock’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 446.
[707] Wallace Stevens, ‘How To Live. What To Do’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 102.

Morning'.[708] I would argue that 'Of Mere Being' is a 'supreme fiction' because it seems to be written out of 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman', and also because it realizes Stevens' 'rock':

> Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.
> Take the moral law and make a nave of it
> And from the nave build haunted heaven. Thus,
> The conscience is converted into palms,
> Like windy citherns hankering for hymns.
> We agree in principle. That's clear. But take
> The opposing law and make a peristyle,
> And from the peristyle project a masque
> Beyond the planets. Thus, our bawdiness,
> Unpurged by epitaph, indulged at last,
> Is equally converted into palms,
> Squiggling like saxophones. And palm for palm,
> Madame, we are where we began.[709]

A comparison of the two poems would allow us to suggest that 'The conscience is converted into palms' becomes, 'The palm at the end of the mind,/ Beyond the last thought'.[710] 'Beyond' denotes the ontological proximity for Stevens and we will recall that for the Greeks, the 'underworld' was where *being* and death meet in oneness, hence it is 'Beyond the last thought' and realized in 'bronze decor', which is a textual signifier of the mythical 'underworld'.[711] In this context, the 'windy citherns' could have become 'The wind moves slowly in the branches'.[712] 'Beyond the planets' has become 'The palm stands on the edge of space'[713]; 'hankering for hymns' has become 'a foreign song' of complete *being*, 'without human meaning,/ Without human feeling'.[714] From this Stevens says that: 'You know then

[708] Wallace Stevens, 'Sunday Morning', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 54.
[709] Wallace Stevens, 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 47.
[710] Wallace Stevens, 'Of Mere Being', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 476.
[711] Ibid., p. 476.
[712] Ibid., p. 477.
[713] Ibid., p. 477.
[714] Ibid., p. 476.

that it is not the reason/ That makes us happy or unhappy'.[715] Here he appears to be intimating that 'happiness' is not derived from the proscriptive meaning of the order of religion, the poetry of the ‘rock’ can stand as a comparable order for Stevens. 'The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down', perhaps because the ‘underworld’ of Tartarus, ‘where’ *being* and death purportedly meet and ‘where’ Stevens hopes *being* is greater than death, is ‘where’ he believes he is conceptually ‘going’, not to 'haunted heaven'.[716] Stevens has supplanted the religious ‘palm’ from ‘A High-Toned Old Christian Woman’ and replaced it with the secular, philosophical ‘palm’ of the physical and the metaphysical, with the meta-poetry of the ‘rock’: 'And palm for palm,/ Madame, we are where we began.’

Kingsley says of Empedocles’ use of the word ‘palm’ that:

> This word used to mean a great deal to ancient Greeks. For them, a palm was not just the hollow of a hand. It also meant the unshakable power that gets and keeps the upper hand even in the most difficult situations, the steadiness that calmly manages to master instead of being mastered. And at the same time it was the part of the body used by artists or craftsmen to manipulate, shape, perfect; was what allowed them to transform their raw material into a work of art by making the subtlest of adjustments from moment to moment….in the Greek language of Empedocles’ time, “palm” happened to be the standard word for an ingenious device; a trick; a cunning scheme.[717]

Can we see how ‘palm for palm,/ Madame’, Stevens could appear to be back ‘where we began’ in ‘Of Mere Being’, by transvaluing the Christian use of the ‘palm’ (tree) for the pre-Socratic ‘palm’ (trick), with all that the pre-Socratic philosophical poetry implies?[718] It is clear now why 'The palms were hot/ As if I lived in ashen ground'

[715] Ibid., p. 477.
[716] Ibid., p. 477.
[717] Peter Kingsley, *Reality*, pp. 330 - 331.
[718] Wallace Stevens, ‘A High-Toned Old Christian Woman’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 47.

when Stevens reshaped his art in 'Farewell to Florida', having emerged from the 'central sky' at the heart of the volcano ('ashen ground').[719]

Indeed this is certainly not the first time that Stevens had utilized such a technique. In 'This Solitude of Cataracts' Stevens had attempted to substitute 'the oscillations of planetary pass-pass' for the 'fixed' state of mere *being*. Eleanor Cook suggests that Stevens' use of 'pass-pass' is a play on the French *passe-passe* ('sleight-of-hand').[720] Stevens' 'palm' is a form of the 'rock' in the sense of the physical and the metaphysical considered as a unified whole. Here he has 'palmed' the Christian sense and replaced it with his 'philosophical' sense 'by making the subtlest of adjustments'.[721] It is his own 'Oxidia' of the here and now toward which his 'inexactnesses' had 'edged', as the satisfaction of belief.[722] The *Harmonium* poem uses the word 'converted' twice, perhaps implying that religion has been converted to poetry. This would further suggest that Stevens prefers to convert to his own sense of a living 'reality', which is 'unpurged' by religion. Finally, the 'hullabaloo' of his poem (much like the 'hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how' from poem III of 'It Must Be Abstract') has refreshed complete reality in the unity of the 'first idea', thus purging (or curing) religious fantasia by accessing the 'centre'.

In this exchange between earlier and later poetry Stevens demonstrates why his poetry has proved so inviting to New Critical readings, and yet also how his sense of *being* attempts to be inclusive beyond the reach of metaphor or the text. Once he has universalized all things as constituting 'poetry' in a sense reminiscent of Gadamer's universal hermeneutics, it is not just the texts of old and new poems that

[719] Wallace Stevens, 'Farewell to Florida', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 97.
[720] Eleanor Cook, *A Reader's Guide to Wallace Stevens*, p. 245.
[721] Wallace Stevens, 'The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 435.
[722] Ibid., p. 435.

are forged together, but all things as appearances. Stevens' modernism is revealed in that he then creates new fictions out of this one 'rock', forced on by the 'it must', by the ever changing seasons. Collapsing poems together is one example of the universal oneness induced by the conceptual 'rock'.

Any sense of 'going' to 'the edge of space' in this death poem ('Of Mere Being') is of course no 'going'. It is the 'transport' of the 'rock' that the 'limits', 'the end' and the 'last' creates. It is the ecstatic experience of the 'rock' that was unveiled in 'Credences'. Such movement that is no movement is considered by Nancy in context of Parmenides as follows:

> Written beneath the title of the last movement of Beethoven's Quartet, op. 135 – "the decision made with difficulty" – he added this well known note: "*Muss es sein? Es muss sein.*" (This could be interpreted in the following way: "Must it (be)? It must (be)? ["Le faut-il (être)? Il le faut (être)"]). If Being simply were, nothing would ever happen, and there would not be any thinking. In addition, the "it must" is not the expression of a simple, immanent necessity (of a nature or destiny). Necessity itself can only be the decided response of thinking to the suspense of Being wherein it is surprised: *Muss es sein?*[723]

If 'The Snow Man' equates to 'nothing had happened because nothing had changed', then Stevens' 'supreme fiction' equates to the 'it must' as a *poesis* that 'surprises' *being* by putting the ground of complete *being* into question, 'must it be?' Standing in the ground of an imagined totality of the physical and the metaphysical, Stevens' 'supreme fiction' attempts to conceptually free itself from 'The the' of religious tradition, and allow the imagination infinite scope in a realization of modernism.

The question arises, if the 'supreme fiction' holds open the way of the imagination to the 'reality' of *being*, then how 'real' or 'true' is the Parmenidean (or any other conceptual) account of *being*? What is the ground of *being* when it is treated as a philosophical concept derived from Parmenides? We will begin to

[723] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p. 176.

address this theme in the next chapter, for now I would conclude that the poems of the 'supreme fiction' fully realized are not seeking a form of expression for themselves, and they do not view themselves as individual poems. The 'supreme fiction' is the perpetual realization of its own manifesto, expressing itself as one thing, collapsing all poems to pure poetry, or in Gadamer's terms, a universal hermeneutics. Gadamer questions: 'How can a whole be formed out of configurations of sound and fragments of meaning? This question leads to the hermetic character of "pure poetry".'[724]

In Stevens' hands as modern poet, 'faith', 'truth' and 'belief' are constant inconstancies, 'squiggling like saxophones', as flux and art are welded together in the ever freshened 'play' of a new *poesis*, indistinguishable from the seasons. For the post-Nietzschean philosopher or poet, the pre-Socratics, embodied perhaps in Santayana's sense of 'old Xenophanes', provided a general critique of the religious imagination, though it is notable that the 'supreme fiction' is happy to swallow the old religious forms whole and even to inhabit their costumes. This in itself recalls the accusation levelled at Stephen Dedalus – 'your mind is supersaturated with the religion in which you say you disbelieve.'[725] Further, the pre-Socratics allowed for the critique of the claim of the religious imagination to be the true *archê* (first beginning) and offered an *apparently* philosophical *archê* as an alternative, often expressed through poetry. The 'supreme fiction' seeks to establish an *archê* of precisely this kind and to 'grow' there in infinitely changing forms as the totalizing expression of itself. Thus it universalizes to the point where individual poems are

[724] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, p. 135.
[725] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, p. 261.

collapsed into the ground of its own nature. ‘It is’, ‘it must’. It is a constructed framework that allows the term modernism to appear to sustain itself.

In failing to identify the ontological connection, Lentricchia perhaps seems hasty in suggesting that the substitution of religion with poetry is merely a ‘banality’ in literary modernism, just as Bloom limits his critical ground by closing his analysis to the ontological in Stevens. In the next chapter we will address the violent implications of Stevens’ ‘reduction of metaphysics’ to ontological terms. From there the final chapter will analyze this ‘violence’ in context of the mythological origin of the pre-Socratic conception of *being* as a ‘oneness’.

Chapter Three

The Violence of a Reduction of Metaphysics in Wallace Stevens' Poetry

In the first chapter we saw how a post-Kantian conception of poetry as an opening of the 'truth' of *being*, has strong lines of connection with pre-Socratic poetic philosophy. Such a connection in *being* was seen as useful for experiencing the 'thing-in-itself'. It was the act of opening a *poesis* that reduced all things to the single 'truth' of *being*, a 'candor', from which they could be infinitely recreated. Such a reduction to the 'truth' of the opening of *being* was seen as a suitable replacement for the religious imagination, which was itself considered to be another form of poetry. The poetic structures of 'major man' and the 'supreme fiction' attempted to surpass this model of reflecting what is close at hand into heaven, by re-grounding imaginative projections in the immanent imagination. This amounted to the creation of a 'meta-poetry' that could hold open the doors 'onto the present' for the perennial *poesis*, and thus the perennial opening of *being*, a continual collapse of meaning in favour of a totalizing re-creation, *ad infinitum*.

In the introduction we followed Derrida and Levinas in defining a 'reduction of metaphysics' to mean a reduction to *being*, in a way that conceptually destroys the pre-given state of the existent 'Other'.[726] As we have noted, the subject of *being* as a branch of metaphysics is more properly called 'ontology'.[727] If we are to definitively analyse Stevens' poetry as an ontological poetry, then we need to test certain 'symptoms' that will disclose it as ontological in primacy. To do this I propose to

[726] Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas', *Writing and Difference*, p. 81.
[727] Simon Blackburn, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 269.

turn to Derrida's critical essay on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, 'Violence and Metaphysics', collected in *Writing and Difference* (1978). From this vantage the intention is to bring to bear an understanding of the symptoms of what Derrida, in an essay concerned with Levinas, refers to as 'ontological violence'.[728] From here it will also be possible to keep Levinas's essay on exteriority, *Totality and Infinity* (1969) in view, to further test the fundamental grounding of Stevens' poetics.

As we progress I will address some of the particular symptoms that Derrida and Levinas highlight in critiquing ontology. In the context of 'Violence and Metaphysics', these 'symptoms' deal specifically with Levinas's critique of what Derrida allows himself to call the 'ontology' of Martin Heidegger.[729] This is immaterial for the purposes of this exercise when we consider that Parmenides conceived of what would come to be termed 'ontology', and that one of the primary aims for Heidegger was to resurrect the fullness of the Parmenidean conception of *being*, believing that the question of the meaning of *being* was covered over from Plato.[730] Indeed, Derrida mentions that Levinas' departure toward a pluralism constitutes a 'break with Parmenides'.[731]

The analysis will not follow a strict chronological order on the basis that it will follow a thematic structure that will identify themes from poems most pertinent to the subject in question. As I continue to increasingly read Stevens' poetry as having affinity with the Parmenidean mode of poetic opening, I will also be questioning the validity of a post-Kantian tradition of philosophy and poetry that equates poetic opening to 'truth'. This will particularly focus on Heidegger and

[728] Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas', *Writing and Difference*, p. 134.
[729] Ibid., p. 81.
[730] Ibid., p. 81.
[731] Ibid., pp. 89 & 108.

Gadamer where Parmenides may be considered a source of philosophical influence as a poetic ontologist. This analysis will move away from reading through the structure and form of Stevens' poetry, and attempt to open up the poems by excavating the roots of the thought that we have shown to animate them.

The Reduction of the 'Other' to *Being*

How is the conception of 'someone' treated in Stevens' most reductive poetry? How can the 'Other' step forth under the annihilating sway? Stevens had written: 'Suppose the poet discovered and had the power thereafter at will and by intelligence to reconstruct us by his transformations. He would also have the power to destroy us. If there was, or if we believed that there was, a center, it would be absurd to fear or to avoid its discovery.'[732] From Derrida's reference to Levinas' *Totality and Infinity* we read:

"To affirm the priority of *Being* over the *existent* is to decide the essence of philosophy; it is to subordinate the relation with *someone*, who is an existent, (the ethical relation) to a relation with the *Being of the existent*, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of the existent (a relationship of knowing), subordinates justice to freedom". This ontology would be valid for every existent, "except for the Other."[733]

For Stevens in the late poem, 'Presence of an External Master of Knowledge', the 'relationship of knowing' is composite with the truth of *being*:

> knowing
> And being are one - the right to know
> Is equal to the right to be.[734]

[732] Wallace Stevens, 'The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet', *The Necessary Angel*, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 670.
[733] Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas', *Writing and Difference*, p. 135.
[734] Wallace Stevens, 'Presence of an External Master of Knowledge', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 468.

For Adorno:

The toil and trouble of the metaphysics of Antiquity – from Parmenides, who has to split thinking and Being so that he might identify them, down to Aristotle – consisted in forcing the division. Demythologization is division; the myth is the deceptive unity of the undivided.[735]

Parmenides had said that: 'For what exists for thinking, and being, are one and the same', maintaining their unity through a *poesis*.[736] In Stevens, the 'Other' is reduced precisely because *being* is allowed to dominate the liberty of thinking, in the moment of a new *poesis*.

In 'Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz', the solipsistic 'Hoon' is reflected upon as one 'Who found all form and order in solitude,/ For whom the shapes were never the figures of men.'[737] However, when Stevens did eventually turn his mind toward other people, he tended to 'relate' to them through a reduction in *being* that utterly negated the existent. For example, 'Sailing After Lunch' raises the epithet 'To expunge all people and be a pupil', which itself can be read as a reminiscence of a reduction to 'the mind of winter':

if the Parmenidean tradition – we know now what this means for Levinas – disregards the irreducible solitude of the "existent," by the same token it disregards the relationship to the other. It does not think solitude, it does not appear to itself to be solitude, because it is the solitude of totality and opacity.[738]

It is 'the solitude of totality and opacity' that is the cosmic mind of 'major man', of Stevens as a poet of the opening of ontological primacy.

Derrida, reflecting upon Levinas's "except for the Other", infers the following from the violence of a reduction to *being*:

[735] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 118.
[736] Peter Kingsley, *Reality*, p. 70.
[737] Wallace Stevens, 'Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 100.
[738] Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas', *Writing and Difference*, p. 91.

Levinas's phrase overwhelms "ontology": not only would the thought of the Being of the existent have the impoverished logic of the truism, but it escapes this poverty only in order to seize and to murder the Other. It is a laughably self-evident but criminal truism, which places ethics under the heel of ontology.[739]

From 'Blue Guitar', Stevens wanted to 'reduce the monster to/ Myself' in a sense which I suggested echoed Xenophanes' poetic collapse of deities into a spherical, amorphous 'self'.[740] No existent people, no 'Other' can stand in this reduction to oneness of 'the two together as one', not even Stevens himself who reflects[741]: 'Or better not of myself at all', a disappearance of self which was evident in 'Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu'.[742] We can know that *being* is recognized as 'otherness' that evaporates the 'Other' for Stevens, because that is how he himself describes *being* in the late poem, 'Of Mere Being':

> without human meaning,
> Without human feeling, a foreign song.[743]

In an essay on Heidegger and Stevens, Ziarek relates that:

Considering Stevens and Heidegger jointly allows us to explore two key, interrelated aspects of what I am calling here the foreignness of poetry. First, the notion that the sense of 'mere being' remains not only without human meaning but without meaning as such. Within this perspective, the task of poetry for both Stevens and Heidegger is to open language to this foreign, non-human sense of being. What this endeavour involves...is a radical critique and, in fact, a transformation of the notion of 'man'.[744]

For Levinas and Derrida such thought stands in the 'Parmenidean tradition' and 'transformation' is a form of 'ontological violence'.[745]

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[739] Ibid., p. 135.
[740] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 143.
[741] Ibid., p. 143.
[742] Ibid., p. 143.
[743] Wallace Stevens, 'Of Mere Being', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 476.
[744] Krzystof Ziarek, 'Stevens, Heidegger and the Foreignness of Poetry', *Wallace Stevens Across the Atlantic*, p. 80.
[745] Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas', *Writing and Difference*, p. 91.

In ‘Credences of Summer’ ‘the metaphysical pine’ and ‘The physical pine’ were allowed to be ‘one’ and that oneness was presented as the totality of the ‘rock’ of *being*. Such a reduction was achieved through the opening of a work of art and the poetic act of forging the physical and the metaphysical together produces a language of violence against the ‘Other’. Joseph Adamson in his *Wounded Fiction – Modern Poetry and Deconstruction* (1988) provides an indication of this:

> A series of violent imperatives govern the syntax of canto II: “postpone,” “Let’s see,” “Burn,” “Burn,” “Trace,” “Look,” “And say,” “Fix,” “And fill,” “Exile”….The command to “see the very thing and nothing else” sets off a crescendo of violent images intensifying those of branding and incision…So as to declare at last without qualification: “this is the centre that I seek.”[746]

The price that is paid for ‘the centre that I seek’ is that of the rational ‘Other’. The centre that was located is where the axis of ‘the physical’ and ‘the metaphysical’ meet as one in *being* as a new *poesis* opens up.[747] We have just noted that Stevens had said that: ‘If there was, or if we believed that there was, a center, it would be absurd to fear or to avoid its discovery.’[748] Further that the poet: ‘would also have the power to destroy us.’[749] Prior to realising that ‘discovery’, Stevens had declared ‘all fools slaughtered’, which allowed him to break into that centre.[750] Bloom suggests that this reference to ‘all fools slaughtered’ would include Stevens’ earlier self ‘as it had been on All Fools’ Day, at the start of April’s green.’[751] Spring is dead. Summer now ‘is’ and it is the overpowering ‘it is’ of summer that Stevens has violently captured and will desperately try to retain. The ‘Other’ is intentionally

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[746] Joseph Adamson, *Wounded Fiction – Modern Poetry and Deconstruction* (New York & London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1988), p. 133.
[747] Wallace Stevens, ‘Credences of Summer’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 322.
[748] Wallace Stevens, ‘The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet’, *The Necessary Angel*, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 670.
[749] Ibid., p. 670.
[750] Wallace Stevens, ‘Credences of Summer’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 322.
[751] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, p. 245

destroyed in Stevens in an effort to achieve an ontological primacy. From this primacy, the poet feels he is able to begin painting a renewed sense of 'human' out of the 'rock' of which he feels we are part.

Stevens was very well aware of what it meant to reduce to 'the very thing and nothing else', aware also of what it would do to the human being.[752] In 'Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit', collected in *Transport*, he writes:

> It is the human that is the alien,
> The human that has no cousin in the moon.[753]

Precisely for this reason it is the *rational* human that Stevens' verse seeks to annihilate, by enlarging the meaning of 'human' to include a reduction of all things to a oneness that would incorporate the moon. It is in this sense that speaking of the moon *is* to 'speak humanly from the height or from the depth/ Of human things', because humanity has been enlarged through the unifying sway of *being*.[754] Levinas strongly objects to such a conception:

We therefore are also radically opposed to Heidegger who subordinates the relation with the Other to ontology….rather than seeing in justice and injustice a primordial access to the Other beyond all ontology.[755]

For Gadamer's *Truth and Method* and Gianni Vattimo's work entitled *Art's Claim to Truth* (2008), the truth-telling function of the work of art relies on the Heideggerian (and I would also argue the pre-Socratic) sense of *being* amounting to 'truth'. Stevens does not stand in the tradition of Heidegger and Gadamer, except to the extent that he had read and valued pre-Socratic philosophy. He may, therefore, fall into Vattimo's conception that 'the need for an ontological foundation of art

[752] Wallace Stevens, 'Credences of Summer', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 322.
[753] Wallace Stevens, 'Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 288.
[754] Wallace Stevens, 'Chocorua to its Neighbor', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 267.
[755] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 89.

grew up not only in philosophy but also in the concrete experiences of the artists.'[756] Such 'truth', according to Levinas and Derrida only produces a violent reduction of the human. In Stevens such violence manifests itself through the painting of the renewed possibilities of humanity out of all things, in the model of 'major man'. For Vattimo, like Stevens, desire for this appears to be driven by a sense that the 'ontological foundation of art' 'transcends consciousness and the human being, whose possibility it authentically grounds.'[757] As we proceed, a contemporary, 'post-modern' philosopher like Vattimo, as an authority on Heidegger, Gadamer and Nietzsche, will prove useful for illuminating the implications of the pre-Socratic elements of their thought, particularly as it pertains to art.

The *Logos* of No One and the Language of Nothing

A further 'symptom' of ontology and its violence against the existent, that Levinas in particular draws attention to, is that of the annihilation of language, speech and of the name:

> To recognize the Other is therefore to come to him across the world of possessed things, but at the same time to establish, by gift, community and universality. Language is universal because it is the very passage from the individual to the general, because it offers things that are mine to the Other. To speak is to make the world common, to create commonplaces. Language does not refer to the generality of concepts, but lays the foundations for a possession in common.[758]

In contrast to the above, Heidegger had maintained – '"But if man must one day arrive in the neighbourhood of Being, he must first learn to exist in that which has no name".'[759] But Stevens is a 'poet', surely it is his very vocation to 'give' language to

[756] Gianni Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*, ed. by Santiago Zabala, trans. by Luca D'Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 94.
[757] Ibid., p. 94.
[758] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 76.
[759] Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas', *Writing and Difference*, p. 137.

the ‘Other’? In his Moody Lecture entitled ‘A Collect of Philosophy’, given at the University of Chicago in 1951, Stevens maintained that human beings are not ‘part’, but are of ‘a whole’ for which 'we have as yet no language'.[760] Such *concepts* accord with Parmenides who also said that the 'it is' has no name.[761] Kingsley notes that 'it had no name for the very simple reason that it had not yet been named.'[762] Stevens’ efforts to pronounce that name come *after* the ‘reduction of metaphysics’ as the poet is ‘flicked by feeling’.

In ‘The Creations of Sound’, collected in *Transport*, Stevens had promoted silence above the language of the intellect. For Stevens this became a reason for triumphing over T.S. Eliot by judging that: ‘He lacks this venerable complication.’[763] ‘Tell X that speech is not dirty silence/ Clarified. It is silence made still dirtier.’[764] To Stevens, a ‘human’ contribution to the silence of mere *being* makes it ‘dirty’, that is, it covers over the ‘first idea’ with rational ‘varnish and dirt’.[765] Stevens’ Language does not constitute the giving of ‘things that are mine to the Other’, because this act is precisely what sullies the purity of poetry in Stevens’ view. Rather, Stevens’ language is often produced by listening to the unveiling of the ‘song’ of the ‘whole’, in which the ‘Other’ is already utterly reduced.

For Levinas who is pulling away from this fully Parmenidean reduction, language is a means of giving community and universality, not enforcing the totalizing oneness of the silence of *being*:

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[760] Wallace Stevens, ‘A Collect of Philosophy’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 856.
[761] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 176.
[762] Peter Kingsley, *Reality*, p. 196.
[763] Wallace Stevens, ‘The Creations of Sound’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 275.
[764] Ibid., p. 275.
[765] A Letter to Henry Church, October 28th, 1942. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, pp. 426 - 427.

The world in discourse is no longer what it is in separation, in the being at home with oneself where everything is given to me; it is what I give: the communicable, the thought, the universal.[766]

If the clean silence that Stevens yearns for is merely 'everything is given to me', then what does this do to the 'Other'?

> X is an obstruction, a man
> Too exactly himself, and that there are words
> Better without an author, without a poet[767]

Not unsurprisingly, X, the man, the poet, Eliot, is viewed as an obstruction:

Thus the silent world would be an-archic. Knowing could not commence in it. But already as an-archic, at the limit of non-sense, its presence to consciousness lies in its expectation for a world that does not come.[768]

'Description Without Place' can be read as a natural conclusion of a world reduced to *being*, which is perhaps not surprising when we consider that that specific poem was written in context of reading Parmenides.[769] It is no surprise to discover that the an-archic conclusion of a world without language, where the poet is entertaining the thought of *being* in primacy, should result in the 'world that does not come' ('without place'), the total destruction of the plane of the existent in favour of the oneness of the plane of the totality of *being*.

In 'The Latest Freed Man' Stevens had defined the nature of his renewal of alignment through poetry as: 'To be without a description of to be'.[770] The shape of much of Stevens' poetry does not come by intellectually writing a poem, it comes through what I am calling the opening of *being* as *aletheia*, without the mediation of the poet's rational intellect:

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[766] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 76.
[767] Wallace Stevens, 'The Creations of Sound', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 274.
[768] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 93.
[769] A Letter to Henry Church, April 4th, 1945. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 494.
& A Letter to José Rodríguez Feo, April 6th, 1945. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 495.
[770] Wallace Stevens, 'The Latest Freed Man', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 187.

It is a shape of life described
By another shape without a word.[771]

Perhaps echoing Mendelssohn's *Songs Without Words*, Stevens' attempt is to locate a 'Pure rhetoric of a language without words', the unifying 'song' of *being*:

to pierce the heart's residuum
And there to find music for a single line,
Equal to memory, one line in which
The vital music formulates the words.[772]

It is true, as Altieri has argued, that such abstraction produces Stevens' 'lyric force', particularly in what I would describe as the poetry of the 'rock'.[773] However, perhaps we need to be more cautious in using the 'Must' for this abstraction when 'abstraction' is only ever used to *conceptually* refresh the 'oneness' of *being* in a way that Levinas suggests annihilates the 'Other'.[774]

Metaphysical Desire

For Levinas, underlying the annihilating impulse of a 'reduction of metaphysics', is the notion of 'Desire'. 'The metaphysical desire does not rest upon any prior kinship. It is a desire that can not be satisfied.'[775] The father of Western metaphysics, Parmenides, was concerned to travel 'as far as longing can reach' in his search for the 'it is'.[776] That use of 'longing', which in the Greek, *thumos*, means 'the energy of passion, appetite, yearning, longing', can be read as a close parallel to Stevens' sense of 'beyond' 'the genius of the sea', or alternatively to his use of the

[771] Wallace Stevens, 'Banjo Boomer', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 475.
[772] Wallace Stevens, 'Extracts From Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 234.
[773] Charles Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Modernism and After* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006), p. 137.
[774] Charles Altieri, 'Why Stevens Must be Abstract', *Wallace Stevens: the Poetics of Modernism*, p. 86.
[775] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 34.
[776] Peter Kingsley, *In The Dark Places of Wisdom*, p. 53.

word ‘transport’.[777] What is desired is not somewhere at an empirical distance, it is the ‘desired’ singing, so close that for Stevens it constitutes what speaks things in the way that they are. For the poet this closeness is experienced as an ‘immanence’, which is how ‘a scrawny cry from outside’ could equally be ‘a sound in his mind’.[778] This ‘new knowledge of reality’ is really achieved by considering all appearances to be connected in the ‘centre’ of *being*, which allows for the founding of ‘new’ worlds, created in the moment of the opening of a work of art.[779]

Vatimo, in a line of thought extending from Heidegger and Gadamer suggests that:

> the work brings into the foreground “that” there be world inasmuch as, by refusing to situate itself in the world as it is, it opens a new world and shows it to us in the moment of its disclosure.[780]

Creation is not something that happened long ago for Stevens, it is something that happens every time he creates, or every time something happens. If Stevens harbours something as extreme as a ‘Desire’ for the fullness of the ontological ‘candor’ of poetry, then Levinas’ break with Parmenides speaks against the ontological intent of Stevens’ poetic ‘transport’.

In ‘The Well Dressed Man with a Beard’ Stevens shows us what kind of hunger exists in the mind, what kind of Desire consumes thought. The oft quoted, ‘It can never be satisfied, the mind, never’, serves to reveal Stevens’ own awareness that the mind desires satisfaction.[781] However, the mind cannot be satisfied by an intellectual fulfilment for Stevens. It would seem that only an alignment of the mind

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[777] Peter Kingsley, *Reality*, p. 27.
[778] Wallace Stevens, ‘Not Ideas About the Thing But The Thing Itself’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 451.
[779] Ibid., p. 452.
[780] Gianni Vattimo, *Art’s Claim to Truth*, p. 69.
[781] Wallace Stevens, ‘The Well Dressed Man with a Beard’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 224.

with a 'reduction of metaphysics' satiates Desire for the poet, as two become one. Stevens' 'modern poetry' was considered to be: 'The poem of the mind in the act of finding/ What will suffice.'[782] 'What will suffice' is the unity of *being* that is reached in the opening of a new *poesis*. For Stevens, this power connects the mind and the world, the imagination and reality, the subjective and the objective.

In 'The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet', Stevens would write of the poet's power as proceeding 'to those violences which are the maturity of his desires.'[783] Levinas points to the acute nature of the problem:

The metaphysical desire has another intention; it desires beyond everything that can simply complete it.[784]

Stevens seems to have been driven to satiate the Desire for the fullness of 'real reality' that is ontologically grounded. It was Santayana, in context of 'the One' of Parmenides' 'blank monism' who had said that it is 'the mystical spirit which will never be satisfied, if fully developed and fearless, with anything short of the Absolute Nothing.'[785] In context of Parmenides, this 'Nothing' is *being*, what Stevens refers to as 'the thin stuff of being'.[786] Adorno suggests of the 'ontological need' that it cannot be 'quenched by the transcendental system', which thirst clearly saw Stevens pushing towards ontological ground in an effort to experience what he refers to as: 'the veritable ding an sich, at last'.[787]

In 'Poetry is a Destructive Force' the 'ox', 'lion' and 'bear' were not the poet's animal nature, but were the 'immanence' of a totalized 'otherness' created by

[782] Wallace Stevens, 'Of Modern Poetry', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 218.
[783] Wallace Stevens, 'The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet', *The Necessary Angel, Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 683.
[784] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 34.
[785] George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, p. 14.
[786] Wallace Stevens, 'The Snow Man', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 8. & Wallace Stevens, 'Piano Practice at the Academy of the Holy Angels', *Opus Posthumous*, p. 42.
[787] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 63. & Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, p. 48.

the poet through the violence of a new *poesis*. They were the collapsing of what I have suggested was the Xenophanean conception of a projected deity, back into the possibilities of the apparent 'self'. The Desire for this connection replaced the Desire for religion in Stevens, and it is the opening of *being* as a *poesis* that attempts to fulfil that Desire. 'Poetry is a Destructive Force' begins with: 'That's what misery is,/ Nothing to have at heart./ It is to have or nothing.'[788] If one doesn't have the 'otherness' of a connection to all things, beating like a volcanic heart in the breast, then one has nothing, is what the poem appears to be suggesting. It is the absolute Desire for the invisible connection that gives birth to this volcano of destructive potential: 'Desire is absolute if the desiring being is mortal and the Desired invisible.'[789] For Levinas, the reason that it destroys the 'human' would appear to be that: 'Desire is desire for the absolutely other.'[790]

The merging with the 'bear' the 'ox' and the 'lion' is the merging of the 'human' with this 'absolutely other' in immanence. For Stevens this is to 'speak humanly from the height or from the depth/ Of human things' in his enlarged sense of 'human'.[791] It avoids Kantian transcendence, which he denies, collapses the anthropomorphic conception of the 'gods' and again enlarges the sense of 'human' by destroying the rational 'human', which is perceived as a limitation. As we have seen, it is the language and form of Stevens' poetry that creates this sense of a collapse to oneness. 'Desire' for a connection would seem to be driving that process. Stevens is certainly not ignorant of the presence of this Desire, rather, he is fully conscious of it, engaging with it, working with it to produce poetry. In poem II from

[788] Wallace Stevens, 'Poetry is a Destructive Force', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 178.
[789] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 34.
[790] Ibid., p. 34.
[791] Wallace Stevens, 'Chocorua to its Neighbor', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 267.

‘It Must be Abstract’ Stevens considers the nature of Desire as connected to the possession of ‘what is not’:

> But the priest desires. The philosopher desires.
>
> And not to have is the beginning of desire.
> To have what is not is its ancient cycle.[792]

Arguably, a momentary fulfilment of the Desire for the ‘what is not’ in primacy, took place in ‘Credences of Summer’, where Stevens was briefly able to fuse ‘The physical pine’ and ‘the metaphysical pine’ in poetry, into a oneness that nourished Desire for a complete ‘reality’.[793] As such in this poem Stevens could say: ‘Exile desire/ For what is not.’[794] ‘The trumpet cries/ This is the successor of the invisible.’ ‘It is the visible announced’.[795] Vattimo provides a sense of how the work of art brought ‘reality’ to stand within itself in ‘Credences’, something that for him is linked to art’s claim to ‘truth’:

> The shock produced by the work is linked to law: in the work a world is encountered as it is being born. While with respect to things belonging to the world nothing is more normal than the fact “that the entity be,” the fact that in the work there is entity at all becomes strange and is encountered in all its radical underivability. We are accustomed to considering the world as always already given: we are interested in what stands inside the world, but we miss it because we take it for granted *that* there be world.[796]

As we have suggested, the process of galvanising the physical and the metaphysical still annihilated the ground of the ‘Other’ to be able to stand, but it also embraced

[792] Wallace Stevens, ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 330.
[793] Wallace Stevens, ‘Credences of Summer’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 322.
[794] Ibid., p. 323.
[795] Ibid., p. 325.
[796] Gianni Vattimo, *Art’s Claim to Truth*, p. 69.

nature as the apex of *being* in oneness. It was this momentary fusion in the *poesis* of a new work of art that fulfilled the Desire for the ontological in primacy.[797]

Violence Against the Face

In the guise of 'major man' Stevens envisages no anthropomorphic form, he is something amorphous, a 'human globe'.[798] For Levinas it is another mode of ontological violence that the reduction to *being* destroys the possibility of the existent human body, and most importantly for Levinas, the face. In *Totality and Infinity* it is the conception of the face that represents the 'Most-High', what he calls 'the height in which God is revealed'.[799] The *form* of the face speaks of God for Levinas.

In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas suggests that the face overwhelms ontology and releases from the tyranny of *totality*:

> The face brings a notion of truth which, in contradistinction to contemporary ontology, is not the disclosure of an impersonal Neuter, but *expression*: the existent breaks through all the envelopings and generalities of Being to spread out in its "form" the totality of its "content," finally abolishing the distinction between form and content. This is not achieved by some sort of modification of the knowledge that thematizes, but precisely by "thematization" turning into conversation.[800]

In Levinas, the face is not just another sign that signifies something else, but it is itself signification which is *already* spoken, prior to ontology:

> It signifies the philosophical priority of the existent over Being, an exteriority that does not call for power or possession, an exteriority that is not reducible.[801]

[797] There is also a parallel realisation and subsequent melancholy in 'Credences of Summer' which we will address in the following chapter.
[798] Wallace Stevens, 'Asides on the Oboe', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 227.
[799] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 79.
[800] Ibid., p. 51.
[801] Ibid., p. 51.

For Levinas: 'The manifestation of the face is already discourse.'[802] Stevens had casually pondered the appropriation of the face that is 'given' in advance, as early as 1917, in an uncollected section of the poem, 'Primordia'. In this instance it is a pondering on the facial features of horses, but perhaps the questioning into the origins of 'eyes' and 'ears' is enough to show conscious thought on the subject:

> The horses are hollow,
> The trunks of the trees are hollow.
> Why do the horses have eyes and ears?
> The trees do not.[803]

As Stevens abandoned the religious faith he had been exposed to within his family as a child, the question of the origin of the face became opaque again. In time, it was the 'whole' of *being* that would be placed in advance of the face in his poetic thought.

In 'The Snow Man' it was not Stevens who regarded and who beheld, it was 'the mind of winter'. The 'mind of winter' was placed in primacy to the face and the apparent beholding and regarding was, as we argued, merely an unveiling of *being* through poetry, prior to the face. Adorno suggests that: 'As Being, which the mind transmits, is ceded to receptive vision, philosophy converges with a flatly irrationalist view of life.'[804] This notion destroys the possibility of the face (except that the poet create it out of *being*) which according to Levinas is spoken prior to ontology – 'The face speaks. The manifestation of the face is already discourse.'[805]

As we have said, the notions of beholding and regarding are certainly present in Stevens, but these do not allow the face in primacy. Rather they are of a reduction of the mind (mind *of* winter) and in this instance deny the 'light' which is prior to the

[802] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 66.
[803] Wallace Stevens, 'Primordia', *Opus Posthumous*, p. 26.
[804] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 85.
[805] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 66.

mind, which allows it to 'see'. I would argue that in Stevens, to 'regard' is a passive state that allows the enacting of what I have referred to as *aletheia*. This is in contradistinction to 'seeing', which is linked to rational 'understanding', to an action of the rational 'self' that begins with the human mind and ends at the object in view. To 'see' would suggest a sense of the self-conscious viewing of an object, while to 'regard' or 'behold' would seem to render the human as the 'site' at which the object *discloses itself*, where a cognitive response would destroy mere 'appearing' and re-establish the 'I' of the ego in primacy. The reduction of the mind to the unveiling of *being* destroys the *possibility* of the face, in what we have shown to be a move against transcendental idealism reminiscent of Heidegger.

The mind 'Destroys romantic tenements/ Of rose and ice', because the mind is allowed primacy over the face of the 'Other', because it reduces the 'Other' to *being*:

> As speech and glance the face is not in the world, since it opens and exceeds the totality. This is why it marks the limit of all power, of all violence, and the origin of the ethical. In a sense, murder is always directed against the face, but thereby always misses it.[806]

As we have evidenced, Stevens seems absolutely determined to remove that which is 'human' at large, in an effort to usher in a broader sense of what it means to be 'human'. In the 'The Auroras of Autumn' Stevens would write: 'The mother's face,/ The purpose of the poem, fills the room.'[807] This would sound like a founding of the 'face' in primacy, even as the purpose of the poem, but it is soon annihilated with: 'And yet she too is dissolved, she is destroyed', if only in the roll of time.[808] The

[806] Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas', *Writing and Difference*, p. 104.
[807] Wallace Stevens, 'The Auroras of Autumn', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 356.
[808] Ibid., p. 357.

face in 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream' is dead and covered with a sheet.[809] In 'United Dames of America' Stevens laments that 'There are not leaves/ Enough to hide away the face of the man'.[810] The existing conception of the face is destroyed in Stevens, because what matters to him is the recreation of the face according to the limits of 'reality'. Levinas has argued that the 'face' is always in advance of the thought of *being*. That the face is annihilated in Stevens is evidence of the reductive thought of *being* in primacy.

The Role of the Metaphysician

In 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' Stevens had adopted the role of a kind of 'Prospero', a 'major man' as the 'intelligence' of all things. This status of the poet as the 'intelligence' in nature was arguably a means of guarding Stevens against a total reduction, like that of 'The Snow Man'. Levinas, in a totally unrelated analysis of the violence of the thought of *being*, yet which so closely pursues Stevens here, suggests that: 'the metaphysician and the other can not be *totalized*. The metaphysician is absolutely separated.'[811] In what sense could Stevens be said to maintain himself as 'separated' from the total reduction? In poem XIX of 'Blue Guitar' Stevens had wished to 'reduce the monster to/ Myself, and then may be myself/ In face of the monster'.[812] The monster is nature, but the struggle, as through *Ideas of Order*, was for the retention of some sense of 'self', or 'better not of myself at all,/ But of that as its intelligence'.[813] This inhuman figure, without a face, is Stevens as the 'intelligence' of nature: 'Being the lion in the lute/ Before the lion locked in

[809] Wallace Stevens, 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 50.
[810] Wallace Stevens, 'United Dames of America', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 188.
[811] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 35.
[812] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 143.
[813] Ibid., p. 143.

stone.'[814] It is the opening of poetry that causes this sense of connection in *being*, though the poet's 'intelligence' is held apart so that he can 'play' of things as he would have them be.

This position allows Stevens to reduce to 'Two things, the two together as one,/ And play of the monster and of myself'.[815] Levinas says: 'But the metaphysician's separation from the metaphysical, which is maintained within the relationship by being produced as an egoism, is not the simple observe of that relationship.'[816] How else can we express this metaphysician of the 'reduction of metaphysics' who is weirdly conjoined, yet separate? He emerges again in 'Of Modern Poetry', still playing the blue guitar:

> In an emotion as of two people, as of two
> Emotions becoming one. The actor is
> A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
> An instrument, twanging a wiry string[817]

This separated figure ('in the dark') who paradoxically is still a part of the 'one', is the 'metaphysican' of reduction that Levinas is inadvertently critiquing.

The model of the poet as mystical metaphysician, corresponds with the practice of Heraclitus, Parmenides and Empedocles. Kingsley has argued that Empedocles has strong affinities with 'the familiar figure in the ancient Near East and Mediterranean of the poet-magician, but also to what has been described as the "cosmic poetry"'.[818] Stevens had praised the poetic value of the 'cosmic poetry' that this kind of philosophy spoke of in 'A Collect of Philosophy'.[819] Kingsley suggests

[814] Ibid., p. 143.
[815] Ibid., p. 143.
[816] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 38.
[817] Wallace Stevens, 'Of Modern Poetry', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 219.
[818] Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic - Empedocles and Pythagorian Tradition*, p. 296.
[819] Wallace Stevens, 'A Collect of Philosophy', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 856.

that the evidence shows that Parmenides was a 'shaman' who believed himself to be 'allied to mysterious Iatromantis figures who were experts in the use of incantatory poetry'.[820] This mode of poetry, attributed to Empedocles and Parmenides expresses:

the belief that the world constitutes a divine whole, with its parts bound one to another by a kind of sympathy. All that is needed to succeed in any enterprise is to manipulate this influence with care.[821]

Stevens had said:

One thing about life is that the mind of one man, if strong enough, can become the master of all the life in the world…Any really great poet, musician, etc. does this.[822]

What becomes clear is that the claim by Heidegger, Gadamer and Vattimo for art to be an event of truth-telling, the opening of a new 'historical epoch' for Vattimo, negates the fact that the 'newness' of this opening is unalterably connected to the mysticism of the pre-Socratics.[823] What philosophers from the 'Frankfurt School' such as Adorno have been able to show, in works such as *Negative Dialectics* (1966) and more particularly in his work co-written with Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), is the way in which history is free from Heidegger's suppression of time as the horizon of *his own* conception of *being*.[824] The metaphysician who presumes to manipulate the ground of *being*, attempts to remain separate from the totality that is itself historically grounded in *myth*.

[820] Peter Kingsley, *Reality*, p. 40.
[821] Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic - Empedocles and Pythagorian Tradition*, p. 296.
[822] A Letter to Hi Simons, August 8th, 1940. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 360.
[823] Gianni Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*, p. 70.
[824] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by John Cumming (London & New York: Verso, 1997), p. ix.

The parallel between pre-Socratic poetic philosophy and Stevens' poetic objective is itself total and the reason for that, and for the theory that we have been unravelling since the beginning here, is that something close to the pre-Socratic locution dominates Stevens' poetics, and for that reason, Stevens' poetics, at times, dominate the 'Other' in totality. 'Major man' is this 'egoism' that remains at the heart of all things, all possibilities, yet where 'major man' is no one else can 'exist' and this is why it opens itself up as a kind of tyranny. Riddel notes that Stevens refers to this state as "indirect egotism", and that through this 'we discover not only one man's mind but mind itself.'[825] Levinas states further:

> The relation of truth thus involves a dimension of interiority, a psychism, in which the metaphysician, while being in relation with the Metaphysical, maintains himself apart.[826]

In a sense reminiscent of Gadamer's conception of 'play', it is into this liminal non-Site that the reader is invited to join the 'metaphysician in the dark', 'twanging a wiry string' that enacts the 'sudden rightness' that will merge the 'Other' with this oneness, 'wholly/ Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,/ Beyond which it has no will to rise'.[827] The individuality of the 'Other' is bound and consumed by the 'will of one man', by one man's conception of *being*. From Stevens' perspective, this is an awakening of a oneness that mollifies *polemos* in the model of Heraclitus or Orpheus. From the perspective of Derrida and Levinas the 'reduction of metaphysics' is tyranny.

In playing of 'two/ Emotions becoming one' in 'Of Modern Poetry', as the metaphysician of the blue guitar, Stevens was still strangely separate, operating as

[825] Joseph H. Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens*, p. 11.
[826] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 64.
[827] Wallace Stevens, 'Of Modern Poetry', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 219.

the 'intelligence' of nature as he had said.[828] Howard Pearce in his essay on *Poiesis and the Withdrawal: The Garden-Motive in Henry James, Wallace Stevens and David Mamet*, has insightfully perceived the important position that the role of the poet occupies in Stevens:

> The figure of the poet is essential to Stevens's poetry, as the voice of the poet establishes the meditative, intimate structure of relationship with the reader that constitutes the playfulness and trust necessary for, or perhaps indicative of, the establishment of the irenic world of the poem. In the persistent emergence of questions about reality and knowledge, the reader is invited in, to share in the thoughtfulness and playfulness of that world. Like the figures of the shepherds in Arcady, the figure of the poet becomes integral to the scene - both as the story teller and as represented images of the poet - and contemplation of the liminal site of the represented world calls for consideration of the poem as both moment and metaphor.[829]

It would appear that the persona that Stevens presents as himself (through voice and image) form an integral part of the 'playfulness' that establishes the 'intimate structure' with the 'reader', which for Gadamer closes up the fourth wall of complete *being*. For Levinas, this model of the standing apart of the metaphysician who is also curiously intimate to the scene, only indicates that a 'reduction of metaphysics' is operating in primacy.

The Pastoral Site and the Garden

So far in this chapter we have been analysing particular aspects of the critique of ontology mounted by Derrida and Levinas and have questioned to see if the same 'symptoms' exist in Stevens' poetry, with a view to ultimately establishing the historical nature of these 'symptoms'. As we have seen both Derrida and Levinas

[828] Ibid., p. 219.
[829] Howard Pearce, 'Poiesis and the Withdrawal: The Garden-Motive in Henry James, Wallace Stevens and David Mamet', *Analecta Husserliana: The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research, Vol. LXXV*, ed. by Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), p. 263.

understand that when they critique Heideggerean 'ontology' for its violence, they are also critiquing the fundamental pre-Socratic ground from which it sprang.

On the subject of the 'pastoral site', which is our next mode of enquiry in following Levinas and Derrida, Derrida has this to say:

> The Site, therefore, is not an empirical Here but always an *Illic*: for Heidegger, as for the Jew and the Poet. The proximity of the site is always held in reserve, says Hölderlin as commented on by Heidegger. The thinking of Being thus is not a pagan cult of the *Site*, because the Site is never a given proximity but a promised one.[830]

When we think of the pastoral scene or the garden in Stevens, is it 'held in reserve'? This holding in reserve of the Site for Derrida would only amount to a 'thinking of Being.' In 'Description Without Place' the Site had been withheld. Stevens, considering 'the supremacy of a figure like Parmenides', who he had been reading at the time of writing 'Description Without Place', could be interpreted as having found precisely what Heidegger found in the Pre-Socratics, as Levinas makes clear[831]:

> Heidegger finds in Presocratism thought as obedient to the truth of Being. This obedience would be accomplished in existing as builder and cultivator, effecting the unity of the site which sustains space.[832]

In 'Wild Ducks, People and Distances', collected in *Transport*, Stevens shows in what sense building and cultivating effects 'the unity of the site which sustains space', and in doing so shows his own affinity with what appears to continually led back to 'Presocratism':

> It was that they were there
> That held the distances off: the villages
> Held off the final, fatal distances,
> Between us and the place in which we stood.[833]

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[830] Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas', *Writing and Difference*, p. 145.
[831] A Letter to José Rodríguez Feo, April 6th, 1945. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 495.
[832] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 46.
[833] Wallace Stevens, 'Wild Ducks, People and Distances', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 289.

Derrida had said that where the thought of *being* is in primacy the Site will be 'held in reserve', never quite coming to presence. It is only on the terms of the 'builder and cultivator' who paradoxically stands between *being* in primacy and the Site, that the Site is allowed to come forth out of *being*. Certainly, in earlier Stevens references to gardens and pastoral scenes, things are in a state of inconstancy, always on the move, never quite fixed. In the much anthologised 'Domination of Black' the remembrance of the garden, of the leaves, 'Turned in the room,/ Like the leaves themselves/ Turning in the wind.'[834] The colours of the heavy hemlocks come 'striding' and the colours in the tails of the peacocks turn like the leaves in the wind. This remembrance of the garden is never allowed to come fully to presence, never gathered fully into the 'now', but is always withheld. Just as Parmenides' opening of a *poesis* is already on the way, already travelling, so Stevens' poetry at times evidences the opening of a space in which the empirical 'here' is withheld.

In 'The Pleasures of Merely Circulating' the garden is again flying around and around like the turning leaves of 'Domination of Black', but this time with the 'angel'. The same Heraclitean 'law' is produced through the language of the poem. We know that Stevens will later lament that 'Adam/ In Eden was the father of Descartes/ And Eve made air the mirror of herself'.[835] Some fundamental, rationalist mistake began in 'Eden' for Stevens, and perhaps collapsing the 'first garden' is an objective for the thought of *being*, which is seeking the primacy of the poet metaphysician to create out of *being*.

In 'The Hermitage at the Center', collected in *The Rock*, description of the natural scene is wrapped around an absence of 'place':

[834] Wallace Stevens, 'Domination of Black', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 7.
[835] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 331.

The leaves on the macadam make a noise -
How soft the grass on which the desired
Reclines in the temperature of heaven -

Like tales that were told the day before yesterday -
Sleek in a natural nakedness,
She attends the tintinnabula -

And the wind sways like a great thing tottering -
Of birds called up by more than the sun,
Birds of more wit, that substitute -

Which suddenly is all dissolved and gone -
Their intelligible twittering
For unintelligible thought.

And yet this end and this beginning are one,
And one last look at the ducks is a look
At lucent children round her in a ring.[836]

As is now familiar, this pastoral scene never quite comes to presence. It is withheld from the centre where this time the 'desired' woman is. Derrida had maintained that: 'The thinking of Being is not a pagan cult of the *Site*, because the Site is never a given proximity but a promised one.' [837] Certainly, through the use of language this pastoral Site is not a 'given proximity'. It is the 'noise' of the leaves that we hear, we are not given the leaves themselves. Equally, it is the softness of the 'grass' that is presented, not the grass itself. It is only the 'desired' that remains, together with the 'wind', which is 'like a great thing tottering', not fully itself, at any moment to topple, evoking the fragility of the scene. The 'Birds' are not simply 'birds', they are 'Birds of more wit', substitutions connected to something greater. Ultimately, all of these 'near' presences are 'all dissolved and gone' as the potential for the 'existent'

[836] Wallace Stevens, 'The Hermitage at the Center', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 430.
[837] Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas', *Writing and Difference*, p. 145.

collapses into the centre. The only thing that finally comes to presence are the 'ducks', but they themselves are hiding the 'desired' one.

I am indebted once again to Howard Pearce for his analysis of 'The Hermitage at the Centre' as that of Ovid's tale of Diana and Actaeon recounted in *Metamorphoses*.[838] However, although Stevens would certainly seem to be using the Ovidean construct of the 'divine' at the heart of this pastoral idyll, I am still inclined to follow Derrida's 'symptom' and suggest that a sense of *being* is still in primacy here. I would argue that a sense of *being* is still the ultimate driver, to which mythology naturally attunes itself for reasons we will investigate in the next chapter. I also consider that although the conception of 'Diana' fulfils the image of the object of metaphysical Desire for Stevens, and that any glimpse of *being* (the 'desired') would be fleeting (like the phoenix in the palm combusting in flame at the merest glance), that this is not ultimately grounded in the pagan Site, though it is certainly using that machinery.

For Stevens, 'The death of one god is the death of all' in a denial of anthropomorphic deities. It is much more important to Stevens to let the sun 'be/ In the difficulty of what it is to be.'[839] If we consider that Stevens' refers to Ovid's story as a tale 'told the day before yesterday', then we are posed with a question: Why should Diana's pastoral Site be 'temporally' collapsed into such close proximity with 'today'? And why should it be that 'this end and this beginning are one'? The answer would seem to be that a sense of *being* is in primacy, in the moment of a new *poesis*. The scene with 'ducks' that Stevens is apparently considering at Elizabeth Park in Hartford, has collapsed to the oneness of the myth

[838] Howard Pearce, 'Poiesis and the Withdrawal: The Garden-Motive in Henry James, Wallace Stevens and David Mamet', *Analecta Husserliana: The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research*, p. 265.
[839] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 330.

of Actaeon (the tale 'told the day before yesterday'), which itself has been collapsed into what Stevens considers as the eternal fundamental primacy of beings orbiting *being*.[840] In both 'places' it is envisaged as a 'ring', reminiscent of the *plenum* of Parmenides' sense of the 'it is'.[841] Because *being* is conceived as eternal, the two scenes are one and *being* is in primacy as history is suppressed.

Just as the 'ducks' form a ring approximate to the pond, so the 'lucent children' crowd around Diana to hide her. Stevens' point is that both are models of the eternal 'law' of the physical orbiting the metaphysical, of form radiating from the absent central ground. Stevens is the Actaeon, the poet, seeking to glimpse his heart's Desire, an ontological Desire. The pastoral Site however is again withheld to allow for the two things to be forged together in the poem. It is notable in this instance how close Stevens was standing, proximally, to the old myths through the oneness of *being* as a philosophical concept that could marry together the physical and the metaphysical in the oneness of a *poesis*.

'Divinity' and 'Deity' Without God

Derrida raises a final symptom of the thinking of *being* in primacy, concerning the conception of 'deity' that does not operate. As we have noted, Derrida had maintained that the Site that is withheld by the thought of *being* is not a pagan cult of the Site. The Site in context of the thought of *being* is not pagan for Derrida because, as with many of Stevens' pastoral Sites, it 'is never a given

[840] Vendler notes that Stevens took regular walks in this park, and that it had a duck pond. (Helen Vendler, *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire* (Cambridge MA & London: The University Press/Knoxville, 1984), p. 59)
[841] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 179.

proximity but a promised one.'[842] Derrida infers from the fact that this Site is still associated with 'the sacred' that:

> The sacred of which it speaks *belongs* neither to religion in general, not to a particular theology, and thus cannot be determined by any history of religion. It is first the essential experience of divinity or of deity.[843]

For Derrida, the thought of *being* opens up a space which is 'within faith and atheism.'[844] The thought of *being* means that 'in a sense which is neither chronological nor logical, nor ontical in general, it *precedes* every relationship to God'.[845] For our final proof that the concept of *being* is the animating primacy of Stevens' poetry, let us consider *being* as the 'space' which for Stevens opens up the possibility of God. For Derrida, such a thought would only result in a conceptual divinity and deity without God. In 'Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit', Stevens had written:

> If there must be a god in the house, must be,
> Saying things in the rooms and on the stair,
>
> Let him move as the sunlight moves on the floor,
> Or moonlight, silently, as Plato's ghost
>
> Or Aristotle's skeleton. Let him hang out
> His stars on the wall. He must dwell quietly.
>
> He must be incapable of speaking, closed,
> As those are: as light, for all its motion, is;
>
> As color, even the closest to us, is;
> As shapes, though they portend us, are.[846]

[842] Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas', *Writing and Difference*, p. 145.
[843] Ibid., p. 145.
[844] Ibid., p. 145.
[845] Ibid., p. 145.
[846] Wallace Stevens, 'Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 288.

Derrida maintains that God is excluded from this thinking that only opens the space of the Sacred and the light of the deity, and that this:

> is at once the *limit* and the *wellspring* of finite-Being as history. Limit because divinity is *not* God. In a sense it is nothing. 'The sacred it is true, appears. But the god remains distant.' Wellspring, because this anticipation as a thought of Being (of the existence of God) always *sees* God *coming*, opens the possibility (the eventuality) of an encounter with God and of a dialogue with God.[847]

That is, 'Not as a god, but as a god might be'.[848] Or 'If there must be a god in the house, must be', it must be one who is 'incapable of speaking'.[849] The possibility of the 'god' is always there, but as we have read it is a 'god' that is withheld, dumb, does not operate. Stevens had declared that 'The death of one god is the death of all', but the 'sacred' and the notion of 'divinity' had never departed from his poetry.[850] Rather, 'Phoebus was/ A name for something that never could be named.'[851] For Stevens 'deities' are expendable, coming and going according to various names. In his poetry that which is first, is sacred, is divinity, is opened up by a poetry rooted in the thought of *being*. It is divinity that does not operate, a key symptom for Derrida that the thought of *being* is in primacy.

It is the highly 'pointed' and accentuated 'is' and 'are' that end the last three lines above, that denote the presence of the thought of *being*. Reading it, the commas hold enough of a pause to fill these statements of *being* with the most pronounced ontological meaning. Thus the thought of *being*, as it had for Heidegger in his Parmenidean entrenchment, annihilates Aristotle and Plato and apparently, the possibility of God. Adorno sees the concept of destroying any thinkers who stand

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[847] Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas', *Writing and Difference*, p. 146.
[848] Wallace Stevens, 'Sunday Morning', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 56.
[849] Wallace Stevens, 'Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 288.
[850] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 329.
[851] Ibid., p. 329.

between Parmenides and the present to be evident in Heidegger also, contending that:

> It is because this insufficiency led to analysis – with the result that the magical extraterritoriality of Being as a vagrant between essence and fact was caught in the web of concepts – that Heidegger, to save the privilege of Being, must condemn the concept's critical labours as a history of decay, as if philosophy might occupy a historical standpoint beyond history while on the other hand obeying a history that is ontologized itself, as is existence.[852]

This elimination of philosophers like 'Plato' and 'Aristotle' who had engulfed *being* in a 'web of concepts' includes God for Stevens. Arguably, both Stevens and Heidegger can be read as attempting to set up a supra-historical wormhole that stands on the ever present ground of Parmenides' 'supreme' *poesis* of the 'truth' of *being*. Ontological poetry and the poet magician take on the role of creator, something which suited Stevens' modernism, clearly evidenced in a figure like the 'metaphysician in the dark'. Derrida continues:

> That the Deity of God, which permits the thinking and naming of God, is nothing, and above all is not God himself, is what Meister Eckhart, in particular, said this way…. 'God operates, deity does not operate, has nothing to operate, has no operation in it, has never any operation in view'.[853]

'Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit' continues:

> If there must be a god in the house, let him be one
> That will not hear us when we speak: a coolness,
>
> A vermillioned nothingness, any stick of the mass
> Of which we are too distantly a part.[854]

That 'vermillioned nothingness' perhaps raises a sense of the 'gold vermilion' that Manley-Hopkins envisages in his poem dedicated to 'Christ our Lord', 'The

[852] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 118.
[853] Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas', *Writing and Difference*, p. 146.
[854] Wallace Stevens, 'Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 288.

Windhover'.[855] The 'god' is forcefully reduced to the totality of the whole because for Stevens it was always equal to 'any stick of the mass/ Of which we are too distantly a part'. What is interesting is the way in which Derrida and Levinas have provided symptoms so accurate in diagnosing the thought of *being* in Stevens, just as they had in Heidegger and Parmenides.

We have moved into a dialogue that obviously involves Stevens, but that equally involves Heidegger, Derrida and Levinas. However, despite appearances Stevens is not necessarily philosophically two or three generations ahead of his time. The connection between Stevens and the phenomenological ontology of the twentieth century, appears to find its strongest parallel in the common bond of the poetic philosophy of the pre-Socratics. What the critique of a 'reduction of metaphysics', adopted from Derrida and Levinas has shown, is the destructive nature of the thought of *being* in primacy to the existent. It has shown its tyranny in totalizing the notion of the 'Other', suggesting that only *being* can open up the existent, or the poet who has become the 'intelligence' of *being*, the author of the *poesis* that uses a conceptual 'cosmic poetry' to enforce reductions. For thinkers such as Adorno, the failure of twentieth century ontology in the hands of Heidegger has been its inability to convincingly extricate *being* from the galvanised form of a concept.[856] Of Heidegger, Adorno suggests that:

> He reaches out for mythology, but his mythology too remains one of the twentieth century. It remains the illusion unmasked by history, an illusion made striking by the utter impossibility of reconciling the myths with the rationalized form of reality with which every possible consciousness is entwined. Heidegger's type of consciousness presumes to mythological status as if it could have that status without being mythological in kind.[857]

[855] Bernard Richards, ed., *English Verse 1830 – 1890* (London & New York: Longman group Limited, 1980), p. 510.
[856] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 118.
[857] Ibid., p. 118.

Heidegger may have reawakened the question of the meaning of *being* that lay buried beneath the Platonic rubble, but his concept of it, much like Parmenides' conception, will fall into history. What remains is *mythos*, always in danger of a new totalizing concept. *Being* becomes conceptual *mythos* when pressed back upon the existent by 'the mind of one man'.[858]

We approach then the question of poetry, of what poets are for and the nature of the evidence presented thus far has been demanding that we ask this question. If ontological thought is as destructive as Derrida and Levinas suggest, and if Stevens is entirely grounded in notions of *being* that resemble the Parmenidean model, then what does it matter? Indeed, does it matter? Stevens himself would seem to totally separate the ethical from poetry. Vaught Brogan has touched on the nuances of Stevens' position:

> It has been easy for critics to conclude that Stevens was serious, even maniacally so, in his insistence that "[e]thics are no more a part of poetry than they are of painting".[859]

Altieri believes that Stevens' metaphor making through the 'as' allows for the mystical 'whole' in a manner that, like Wittgenstein's 'Modernist adaptations', allows ethics and aesthetics to be one.[860] For Altieri this demonstrates the way in which Stevens' abstract poetry and the act of reading it shows us how 'the unreal can play a cogent part in the world'.[861]

However, Altieri wants to argue that 'The being of beings is simply a matter of how the I manipulates "the intricate evasions of as"', when in fact Stevens'

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[858] A Letter to Hi Simons, August 8th, 1940. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 360.
[859] Jacqueline Vaught Brogan, *The Violence Within The Violence Without - Wallace Stevens and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Poetics*, p. 26.
[860] Charles Altieri, 'Why Stevens Must be Abstract', *Wallace Stevens: the Poetics of Modernism*, pp. 110 - 111.
[861] Ibid., p. 109.

'reduction of metaphysics', as a *concept* in advance of the language of the poem, the 'I' and the reading 'Other', does not allow such a subjective position to come forth. Altieri recognises that 'attributing social force to the grammar of "is" and "as" would be a dangerously abstract means of proclaiming a sense of community', but this leads him to move away from the implications of Stevens' ontological 'sense of community', towards the 'distinctive' 'lyric force' of the poetry.[862] However, rather than reading around Stevens' 'reduction of metaphysics', the next chapter will address the origins and structure of this 'force', as a concept that for Stevens is there in advance of the manipulation of the 'intricate evasions of as'. Ethics are not a part of Stevens' poetry and nor are they a part of what he means by 'poetry'. Stevens felt that: 'The morality of the poet's radiant and productive atmosphere is the morality of the right sensation.'[863] 'Sensation' precedes the 'as' in the 'candor' of the poet's 'radiant' 'atmosphere', that is *itself* productive, as the 'shape without a word' produces the 'shape of life' that the poet *subsequently* describes as he is 'flicked by feeling'.[864] It is the thought of *being* that determines the need for the 'as' for Stevens, not the other way around.

Stevens' 'morality of the right sensation' is reminiscent of the 'post-modern' thinking of Vattimo. Vattimo's connecting of the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger creates a dual-headed ground from which he envisages Nietzsche's sense of 'accomplished nihilism' to spring.[865] Vattimo's alignment of Nietzschean and Heideggerian conceptions of nihilism leads him to suggest that the post-modern

[862] Charles Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Modernism and After*, p. 137.
[863] Wallace Stevens, 'The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet, *The Necessary Angel, Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 679.
[864] Wallace Stevens, 'Banjo Boomer', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 475.
[865] Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, trans by. Jon R. Snyder (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 19.

requires that 'we begin to be, or to be able to be, accomplished nihilists.'[866] Altieri has suggested that Stevens' poetry of the abstract 'there' 'provides a substantial theory for living here.'[867] However, this assumes that 'the right sensation' makes any distinction between 'here' and 'there' in its absolute reduction. One of Vattimo's aims, in the tradition of Heidegger and Gadamer, is to 'open up a non-metaphysical conception of truth which would interpret truth...on the basis of the experience of art or the model of rhetoric'.[868] Such a post-metaphysical view has affinity with Stevens' sense of 'the morality of the right sensation', though this also does not necessarily portend that Stevens is ahead of his time. As we progress to chapter four we shall increasingly assess if this sense of the 'post-modern' really moves forward in a freedom from the historically grounded lineage of the pre-Socratics, and whether, like Vattimo, it tries to argue that it does not mark a 'return' to Parmenides, which of course is in opposition to Levinas' own conscious break with Parmenides.[869]

Gerald L. Bruns has argued of Stevens' sense of 'otherness' that 'the phenomenon of the voice of the other always threatens this outlook, and that this is the truth that Stevens' poetry teaches us, particularly in the way in which otherness is obsessively aestheticized.'[870] What are poets for? This is Heidegger's question. My question here is, what is the poet based upon and does this basis present itself as a historical idea? Where does the idea of the destruction and recreation of humanity as part of the whole originate for pre-Socratic poetic thought? Further, is Stevens'

[866] Ibid., p. 19.
[867] Charles Altieri, 'Why Stevens Must be Abstract', *Wallace Stevens: the Poetics of Modernism*, p. 116.
[868] Ibid., p. 12.
[869] Ibid., p. 5.
[870] Gerald L. Bruns, 'Stevens Without Epistemology', *Wallace Stevens: the Poetics of Modernism*, ed. Albert Gelpi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 35.

poetry *doing* something more fundamental than just showing us that ethics and aesthetics are one? Is it *doing* more than simply relating a 'truth' about the potential interruption of the 'Other'?

Chapter Four

The Mythological Structure of Stevens' 'Rock'

Post-this, post-that, post-the-other, yet in the end
Not past a thing.[871]

Having seen the ethical implications of the 'reduction of metaphysics' to *being* in Stevens' poetry, the following chapter will investigate the dialogue between the pre-Socratic philosophy and the mythological elements that also appear to exist in Stevens' poetry. We will look at the common elements extant in poetic ontological philosophy and Greek tragic poetry. The aim of this analysis will be to establish the ground of the claim for a truth-telling function for the work of art, and to evaluate why Levinas and Derrida consider a reduction to *being* to be 'violent'. In the course of this analysis we will also make some reference to how these 'elements' characterize Stevens' response to Keats' poetry, as representative of romanticism.

Vattimo has made a conscious effort to align Nietzschean and Heideggerian thought. His approach is to 'place these two fields of thought in direct contact with each other' and this 'contact' 'means to discover in them both new and richer aspects of truth.'[872] The 'aspects of truth' that Vattimo sees in Nietzsche and Heidegger are connected to the future of the 'ontological meaning of art'.[873] Vattimo says:

if one wants to indicate the direction of a thought that attempts to recover the ontological meaning of art, one can name immediately Nietzsche and Heidegger – especially Heidegger – who separate themselves from the general tendency to empty

[871] Seamus Heaney, 'On His Work in the English Tongue', *Electric Light* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 61.
[872] Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, p. 1.
[873] Gianni Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*, p. 42.

art of its ontological content and open new paths to recover the ontological bearing of art.[874]

In an early work entitled *The End of Modernity* (1988), Vattimo decries any contemporary philosophical positions that 'call for a return to the origins of European thought, sometimes even by citing Nietzsche and Heidegger'.[875] More disturbing still to Vattimo is the view that "there might not *have* to come out of these same origins what has in fact come out of them. This is far more serious, for probably a 'return' to Parmenides would mean only to start again from the beginning".[876]

However, Vattimo's will not to return to Parmenides seems to overlook the violence that Levinas and Derrida identify in this reductive poetic thought. Why, for example, is the 'reduction of metaphysics' to *being* violent and for our purposes, why are its symptoms found in Stevens' reductive poetry? To answer that question I propose to look at the mythological origin of the concept of the 'oneness' of *being*, and to consider it as a historically grounded idea that has original affinity with primal violence.

The Mythology of an 'Antimythological' Poet[877]

Heidegger has argued that the 'goddess' who teaches Parmenides that 'being' and 'seeming' are part of the 'it is', is called 'truth'.[878] This 'goddess' is not 'the goddess *of* truth' for Heidegger, as Artemis is called the 'goddess of hunting' by the ancient Greeks, but 'she' is proposed as simply 'truth' in an unqualified sense.[879]

[874] Ibid., p. 42.
[875] Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, p. 5.
[876] Ibid., p. 5.
[877] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, p. 259.
[878] Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, p. 5.
[879] Ibid., p. 5.

The 'truth' ‘she’ encompasses is that ‘being’ and ‘seeming’, or if we adopt Stevens' language, 'reality' and the 'imagination', are unified in the enlarged 'truth' of the 'goddess' who Parmenides reaches through a *poesis*. Parmenides' philosophy therefore relies on calling a 'goddess' 'truth'. What Stevens’ seems to want from this kind of thought is Parmenides’ sense of an enlarged reality that includes the imagination, and also the sense of ‘travelling’ through a *poesis* to mean an ecstatic transport of this enlarged sense of present reality. This is the model, or fiction, that Stevens chooses to believe.

Stevens had said he was about to write 'Description Without Place' two days before considering 'the supremacy of a figure like Parmenides'.[880] For Bloom, ‘the puzzle of the poem is why he wrote it.’[881] Stevens chose to open that poem with the line: 'It is possible that to seem - it is to be'.[882] The poem continues with a reference to a woman of 'divine' magnitude:

> Her green mind made the world around her green.
> The queen is an example…This green queen
>
> In the seeming of the summer of her sun
> By her own seeming made the summer change.[883]

'She' is presented as the anonymous 'deity' of both *being* and change and I would argue that 'she' appears consistently throughout Stevens’ poetry, just as for Parmenides 'she' was reached through a *poesis* that unites ‘being’ and ‘seeming’.[884] In section V Stevens links the ‘seeming’ of ‘description without place’ to the ‘desire’

[880] A Letter to Henry Church, April 4th, 1945. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 494.
& A Letter to José Rodríguez Feo, April 6th, 1945. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 495.
[881] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, p. 239.
[882] Wallace Stevens, ‘Description Without Place’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 296.
[883] Ibid., p. 296.
[884] In light of the Parmenidean connection to this poem, I disagree with Arnd Bohm’s suggestion that Stevens’ ‘green queen’ refers to Elizabeth I. (Arnd Bohm, “The Identity of the ‘Green Queen’ in ‘Description Without Place.’” *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, Vol. 27 No 2 (Fall 2003): 225-254).

for ‘A palm that rises up beyond the sea’, which as Bloom notes, appears to foretell of Stevens’ sense of *being* from ‘Of Mere Being’.[885] What seems to fascinate Stevens is that when a poetry like Parmenides’ penetrates to what he considers to be the real, then the mind immediately presents this ‘first idea’ as a figure. Stevens continues in ‘Description Without Place’:

> In the golden vacancy she came, and comes,
> And seems to be on the saying of her name.
>
> Her time becomes again, as it became,
> The crown and week-day coronal of her fame.[886]

If a new *poesis* opens *being* as it apparently had for Parmenides, then that moment is the moment when the mind applies fictitious concepts to that sense of *being*. It is the moment in which poetry is born. However, viewed conceptually, the historical ground of *being* in the Parmenidean tradition is itself derived from a fiction that is consistently revived in Stevens (‘Her time becomes again’). The mythical concept of the ‘goddess’ stands behind the concept of *being* as a ‘oneness’.[887] Both *concepts* are mythological and derived from the imagination as poetry, which is why Stevens understands that: ‘The first idea is an imagined thing’.[888] It is also why the Heraclitean fire that generates flux was presented as the non-existent ‘firecat’ in ‘Earthy Anecdote’, and why *being* was presented as the ‘invisible’ ‘Angel’ in ‘Angel Surrounded by Paysans’. The imagination had in Stevens’ view, *necessarily* wrapped the nothing of the ‘first idea’ in an imagined form, to allow *being* to be manifest on the terms that humans decree for it.

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[885] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, p. 372.
[886] Wallace Stevens, ‘Description Without Place’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 297.
[887] A similar concept has been traced by Arthur O. Lovejoy in his work entitled: *The Great Chain of Being* (1936).
[888] Wallace Stevens, ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 334.

Vendler has suggested that 'Description Without Place' is 'enclosed in a kind of baby talk in which the complicated and abstract philosophical vocabulary usual to such arguments is deliberately replaced by its simplest and most primitive substitutes, as "appearance" becomes "seeming," "reality" becomes "the sun," "imagination" becomes "a queen."'[889] Though I am not relying upon a source based reading it seems clear that Vendler is describing a close parallel with Parmenidean philosophy, which unites 'seeming' and 'being' in this 'queen' through a *poesis*. 'Seeming' and 'being' are proposed as one in the 'goddess' for this thinking, as reality becomes a theatre of appearance: 'Let be be finale of seem'.[890] Violence occurs in the moment in which Stevens reduces reality to the fiction of the 'goddess' as an 'ontological' ground.

Precisely as Heidegger had said, Aetios records that, at the centre of Parmenides' *Entity* '"is the goddess who steers the course of all things."'[891] For Aristotle: 'The science of the Entity for what it is and the science of God, the Entity par excellence, are one and the same science.'[892] Burnet, who Stevens had read by 1945, says of Parmenides' 'goddess' that:

We are further told by Aetios that this goddess was called Ananke and the "Holder of Lots." We know already that she "steers the course of all things," that is, that she regulates the motions of the celestial bands. Simplicius adds, unfortunately without quoting the actual words, that she sends souls at one time from the light to the unseen world, at another from the unseen world to the light…and so here once more we seem to be on Pythagorean ground. It is to be noticed further that in fr. 10 we read how Ananke took the heavens and compelled them to hold fast the fixed courses of the stars, and that in fr. 12 we are told that she is the beginner of all pairing and birth. Lastly, in fr. 13 we hear that she created Eros first of all the gods. So we shall

[889] Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings – Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems*, p. 219.
[890] Wallace Stevens, 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 50.
[891] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 189.
[892] Julian Marias, *History of Philosophy*, p. 65.

find that in Empedokles it is an ancient oracle or decree of Ananke that causes the gods to fall and become incarnate in a cycle of births.[893]

Guthrie notes of Parmenides' poem that: 'The religious intensity of the passage, and its allusion to the traditional functions of Ananke, must not be set aside any more than the fact that the whole exposition is a revelation from a goddess.'[894]

Jonathan Barnes is more sceptical. Barnes suggests that Parmenides' allegorical prologue concerning a 'journey' to the 'goddess', is 'for the most part of little philosophical importance'.[895] Such an assessment seems correct, but since Stevens appears to use a model akin to the 'religious' form of Parmenides' poem, we are at liberty to pursue Stevens' poetry according to the model of this mythology. This liberty is derived from the fact that Stevens had been writing about Parmenides' 'goddess', 'Ananke'[896], either directly or indirectly from his earliest collection, calling 'her' 'The One of Fictive Music' in *Harmonium*[897], and 'the final god' in 'Owl's Clover'[898]:

> The sense of the serpent in you, Ananke,
> And your averted stride
> Add nothing to the horror of the frost
> That glistens on your face and hair.[899]

In 1940 Stevens wrote to Hi Simons to explain some details concerning 'The Greenest Continent' from 'Owl's Clover', as follows:

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[893] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, pp. 190 - 191.
[894] W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Volume II - The Presocratic Tradition From Parmenides to Democritus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), pp. 35 - 36.
[895] Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 156.
[896] Bloom suggests that Stevens may have taken his use of 'Ananke' as the emblem of 'Necessity' 'from Nietzsche's Zarathustra, or from Shelley.' (Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, p. 255). Although I don't dispute these possible sources, I want to draw parallels between Stevens and Parmenides and argue that they both blend the figure of 'Necessity' with the notion of *being* in their poetry.
[897] Wallace Stevens, 'To the One of Fictive Music', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 70.
[898] Wallace Stevens, 'Owl's Clover', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 162.
[899] Wallace Stevens, 'Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 122.

If one no longer believes in God (as truth), it is not possible merely to disbelieve; it becomes necessary to believe in something else. Logically, I ought to believe in essential imagination, but that has its difficulties. It is easier to believe in a thing created by the imagination. A good deal of my poetry recently has concerned an identity for that thing. While Ananke may have been an improvisation, or an importation from Italy, still it was, at the time the poem was written, that thing...I think that the history of belief will show that it has always been in a fiction. Yet the statement seems a negation, or, rather, a paradox.[900]

I would argue that from 'Sunday Morning', the *machinery* of Ananke as a replacement for religion was firmly in place. It was the totalizing song that reduced the heavens at Key West. It was the absolute expression of the *Necessity of belief* that was 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction'. It was the 'must it be?'/ 'it must be' experience of the implacable 'rock', with which Stevens was trying to enact 'the necessity' 'of a final accord with reality'.[901] It was also the nightmare of *The Auroras*. Ananke, or the philosophical veneer that covered Ananke, was always the 'thing' that Stevens necessarily reverted to after choosing to 'no longer' believe 'in God (as truth)'.[902]

Riddel has said that in Stevens, 'mythology, stripped of belief, becomes a form.' Certainly it would seem to be true that Stevens rejected every anthropomorphic sense of a 'god'. However, Vendler references in a footnote that, 'Ananke was, at the time *Owl's Clover* was written, the only thing in which he believed.'[903] If Stevens 'believed' in any 'deity', then it was the amorphous entity of *being* in whom reality and the imagination stood as one, an enlarged 'real reality' which brings him into dialogue with Parmenides. Stevens' reasons for awakening

[900] A Letter to Hi Simons, August 28th, 1940. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 370.
[901] A Letter to Charles Tomlinson, June 19th, 1951. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 719.
[902] That 'Ananke' was an 'improvisation' for the first time in 'Owl's Clover' seems questionable considering that the model is present in earlier poems such as 'To the One of Fictive Music' of *Harmonium*, and 'The Idea of Order at Key West' from *Ideas of Order*. That the concept was imported from Italy forms a loose line of connection to Parmenides who came from 'Velia', or 'Elia' in Italy.
[903] Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings – Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems*, p. 324.

this kind of thinking may be that, as for Heidegger and Gadamer, it allowed for the notion that poetry has a truth-telling function through its connection to *being*. However, such 'truth' manifests itself as just another fiction, envisaged at times as 'Ananke', the mythological ground of the notion of *being* as a unified 'oneness'.

Critchley and Ziarek want to emphasize the 'powerlessness' of Stevens' ontological poetry, and Ziarek argues that this is[904]:

> reminiscent of the way in which Heidegger tries to think 'being' as 'power-free' (*macht-los*): it is not powerlessness as in being without or devoid of power but rather 'power-free', released or disengaged from the operations of power.[905]

However, Stevens very clearly calls the 'first idea' the 'excitation' of 'a pure power'.[906] This 'pure power' advocated in the 'Notes' is not the *polemos* evident in Stevens' poetry of the late 1930's and early 1940's, rather it is *being* established as a oneness in advance of (and therefore over and against) individual beings in their apparent struggle. Heraclitus had considered that this absolute absence of struggle would bring about 'the destruction of the universe' in which all things 'pass away'.[907] The ecstasy of Stevens' 'pure power' 'Beating in the heart' recalls Derrida, who notes that: 'By another paradox, the philosophy of the neutral communicates with a philosophy of the site, of rootedness, of pagan violence, of ravishment, of enthusiasm, a philosophy offered up to the sacred, that is, to the anonymous divinity, the divinity without the Deity.'[908] Stevens' sense of 'the body quickened and the mind in root' through the immanence of the 'rock', reveals the binary opposition at the heart of his poetry (through the re-birth of 'man' into the universal Necessity as

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[904] Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are – Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, p. 81.
[905] Krzysztof Ziarek, 'Without human meaning': Stevens, Heidegger and the Foreignness of Poetry', *Wallace Stevens Across the Atlantic*, p. 87.
[906] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 331.
[907] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 136.
[908] Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas', *Writing and Difference*, p. 97.

'female' to create 'major man') and the ontological 'meaning' of the work of art as Vattimo conceives of it.[909] Altieri seems to rejoice in this process, making the assumption that the subjective reader can still stand under the reduction and that the act of reading Stevens' poems makes us 'become, in effect, "like rubies reddened by rubies reddening" because our "read-ening" intensifies our capacity to participate in what cannot change, but what can appear as a new emblem for our own powers.' [910] Inadvertently, this allowing of the self to be 'played' binds us into the conceptual ground of Parmenidean philosophy. However, Adorno has said that:

> Showing up, along with Heidegger's concept of Being, is the mythical concept of fate...The eulogized undividedness of existence and essence in Being is thus called by name as what it is: the blind context of nature; the doom of concatenation; the absolute negation of the transcendence whose tremolo notes quiver in the talk of Being.[911]

If Aristotle transformed *mythos* to mere fiction, or fable, Stevens, in a model that is reminiscent of the pre-Socratics and the tradition that revered them, had returned to the historically grounded *concept* of a universal *mythos*.[912] As part of a post-theological age Stevens' poetry chooses to believe a fiction. In a letter of 1940 Stevens implies that 'the heaven in Europe is empty, to recognize Ananke, who, now more than ever, is the world's "starless crown".'[913] What Stevens does not appear to consider is Adorno's contention that:

> Faith in Being, a dim weltanschauung derived from critical premonitions, really degenerates into a bondage to Being, as Heidegger incautiously defined it once.[914]

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[909] Wallace Stevens, 'The Rock', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 446.
[910] Charles Altieri, 'Why Stevens Must be Abstract', *Wallace Stevens: the Poetics of Modernism*, p. 114.
[911] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 118 - 119.
[912] Gianni Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*, p. 9.
[913] A Letter to Hi Simons, August 28th, 1940. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 370.
[914] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 68.

At times Adorno is even more pointed in his critique of a 'Faith in Being', suggesting that 'Heidegger promotes slave thinking.'[915]

'Ananke' originally conveyed the idea of 'binding' and Heinz Schreckenberg has found evidence that in Homeric phrases Ananke "means 'fetters,' 'yoke,' or 'bonds'" and that 'she' held 'the cosmos together in inescapable bonds.'[916] We will recall that in forging his 'rock', Stevens had outlined 'One of the limits of reality', experienced through ecstatic poetic 'transport'.[917] Guthrie, in investigating the link between Ananke and Parmenides, provides the perfect description of the Parmenidean model:

> Necessity and Fate, Ananke and Moira, were in Parmenides's day mighty personal beings, of whom Ananke appears also in the second part of the poem. Just as here she holds the one being in the bonds of a *peirar*, and her companion Moira fetters it to be unmoved, so in the world as it appears to mortals she herself 'fetters' or compels the heaven to hold the *peirata* of the stars. Whatever the relation between the two worlds of reality and the seeming, the language of each is designed to remind us of the other; and the Ananke who controls the sky and the stars is the same cosmic goddess who in Plato's *Republic* holds the spindle on which all the circles of the stars revolve.[918]

Such a description is highly reminiscent of Stevens' account of the 'Fixing' of 'emblazoned zones and fiery poles' in the 'Key West' poem.[919] What Stevens appears to want from the fictional concept of 'Ananke' as perpetual creator of order, is a form of poetry as the base of reality (*being*) that his own poetry can replace, using its precise model. What I want to investigate here is why the 'reduction of metaphysics' to *being* (conceived from the concept of Ananke), through a *poesis*, has a dialogue with 'violence'.

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[915] Ibid., p. 89.
[916] Mihai I. Spariosu, *God of Many Names – Play, Poetry and Power in Hellenic Thought From Homer to Aristotle*, p. 76.
[917] Wallace Stevens, 'Credences of Summer', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 323.
[918] W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Volume II - The Presocratic Tradition From Parmenides to Democritus*, p. 35.
[919] Wallace Stevens, 'The Idea of Order at Key West', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 106.

The Ontological Nature of Greek Tragedy in Wallace Stevens' Poetry

Heidegger sees the pre-Socratic notion of the unification of 'being' and 'seeming' to be at work in the *poesis* of Greek tragedy:

> For the thinking of the early Greek thinkers, the unity and antagonism of Being and seeming were powerful in an originary way. However, this was all portrayed at its highest and purest in Greek tragic poetry. Let us consider Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. Oedipus, who at the beginning is the savior and lord of the state, in the brilliance of glory and the grace of the gods, is hurled out of this seeming….In the end, he is unconcealed in his Being as the murderer of his father….The path from this beginning in brilliance to this end in horror is a unique struggle between seeming (concealment and distortion) and unconcealment (Being).[920]

Something of the mechanics of 'the thinking of the early Greek thinkers' is found in Greek tragedy, that is seen as 'powerful in an originary way'. It is the 'unity and antagonism of Being and seeming' that forms part of the structure of the *poesis* of Greek tragedy for Heidegger, and he calls it power. Oedipus is described by Heidegger as being 'hurled' out of one state and into another. This implies that Oedipus as an individual is utterly subject to the two warring powers and is fundamentally transformed by them, through violence. This 'antagonism' between 'Being and seeming' is reminiscent of the pre-Socratic concept of *polemos* and parallels the antagonism that exists between 'the lion in the lute' (seeming/imagination) and 'the lion locked in stone' (reality/being), to which Stevens had reduced himself on the way to creating 'major man'.[921]

I would argue that the destruction and renewal of the tragic hero on ontological terms is precisely the mechanics that Stevens uses in creating 'major man'. In other words, according to Heidegger's interpretation of Parmenides, the

[920] Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, pp. 111 - 112.
[921] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 143.

destruction and rebirth of the tragic hero is a rebirth into the 'it is' of 'Ananke', who binds 'Being' and 'seeming' as *one*. In Stevens this imagery is fulfilled in the unison of the reigniting 'phoenix' and the evergreen 'palm', located in the 'bronze' 'underworld'. Guthrie maintains of Ananke that "in Aeschylus, as here in Parmenides, she is 'one form with many names'", and that 'she' was evident to Parmenides' 'Pythagorean-trained mind'.[922] As we proceed I propose to demonstrate that the same structure that Heidegger sees in Greek tragedy is at work in Stevens' poetry. This will be done in order to identify the source of this reductive 'violence' in 'early Greek' thinking and to demonstrate its existence in Stevens' poetry.

Altieri, in an essay concerned with Stevens and elements of Husserl, considers Critchley's emphasis on: "the ideal of 'letting be' and a corresponding eagerness to celebrate what manages to resist the ego's demands and the rhetorician's skills" as follows[923]:

> I think this model is neither sufficiently rich in its affirmations nor sufficiently dark in its sense of tragedy to be adequate to late Stevens. (The appropriate sense of tragedy has to involve finding an aspect of the will that can come to terms with necessity.)[924]

I agree with Altieri in this instance that Critchley's effort brackets philosophy in such a way as to separate it from a *mythos* common to Attic tragedy. Here I will consider that symbiotic relationship in early and late Stevens and his attempt to establish its connection to 'necessity'.

At this point we will turn to the late Laureate, Ted Hughes, in order to make use of the comparative mythology that he employs in his elucidation of the

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[922] W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Volume II - The Presocratic Tradition From Parmenides to Democritus*, p. 64.
[923] Charles Altieri, 'Stevens and the Crisis of European Philosophy', *Wallace Stevens Across the Atlantic*, p. 70.
[924] Ibid., p. 70.

mechanics of Shakespearean tragedy. Hughes and Stevens are of course radically different poets in almost every respect. However, I want to use Hughes' comparative mythology as a *model* to illuminate the connections between pre-Socratic poetic mysticism, Greek tragic poetry and the mythological references in Stevens' poetry. The purpose of this is to attempt to account for the source of reductive, poetic 'violence', and to demonstrate how a reworking of historical concepts for 'modern' ends also accounts for the primal violence at work in that same 'modern' poetry, in its dialogue with the past.

In his *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992), Hughes traces the fusing of the Apollonian and the Dionysian in Shakespeare's tragedies, and in this instance in context of Heraclitus:

> "The Pythia, with raving mouth, uttering her unlaughing, unadorned words, reaches us over a thousand years with her voice - through the inspiration of the god," says Heraclitus. It is worth a glance, just in passing the shrine at Delphi, to see that Dionysus, the archetypal dying and resurrected god, was buried here and that the Delphic priesthood regarded him as the cyclic, or dying and reborn, inner being of Apollo.[925]

'Let Phoebus slumber and die' says Stevens in the 'Notes'.[926] Stevens knows that 'Phoebus' was just 'a name for something that never could be named', but he retains the precise model as he introduces his 'major man', that is the 'human' reborn ('swaddled') into the fullness of amorphous complete *being*.[927] In an early chapter of his posthumously published work, *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, Nietzsche had written on the 'Mythical Preliminary Stage of Philosophy'.[928] Prior to elaborating

[925] Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1992), p. 373.
[926] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 329.
[927] Ibid., p. 335.
[928] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, p. 10.

upon Heraclitus, Parmenides and the other pre-Platonics, Nietzsche suggests that in 'Delphi' 'we find an epicenter of philosophical theology.'[929]

Hughes shows that for the Greeks the tension between the Apollonian and Dionysian, which results in the 'death' and 'rebirth', takes place within the context of 'the ecstatic wave of a Goddess mystery religion', that is, in his own terms, in context of the 'Goddess of Complete Being'.[930] Hughes is suggesting that in the traditional model of tragic poetry, the Apollonian and the Dionysian are forged together in the woman of 'Complete Being' through a process of 'death' and 'rebirth', symbolically uniting the rational and the irrational in the renewed 'oneness' of the 'goddess'. For Stevens, such mythic machinery appears to suit his modern aims, as the rational and existent forms are overpowered, infinitely destroyed and made anew in the fiction of the 'goddess' as the ultimate ground.

Hughes notes further that:

> Apollo's shrine at Delphi was originally the shrine of the great serpent, Python. The oracular priestess, the Pythia, spoke literally with the voice of the Earth as the original serpent – the great Serpentine Goddess as Total, Unconditional Being.[931]

The Greeks believed the site of Delphi to be the centre of the earth, represented by a stone, the *omphalos* or navel, which was guarded by Python. Stevens' 'Fat girl' (earth) had needed the 'irrational distortion' to be included to achieve his sense of the 'rock', which was the 'centre' that Stevens had sought. The conception of the 'goddess' was consistently identified with serpents for Stevens: From the 'aspic nipples' mentioned in the early poem, 'In the Carolinas'[932]; to 'The snake' who had

[929] Ibid., p. 10.
[930] Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, p. 374.
[931] Ibid., p. 373.
[932] Wallace Stevens, 'In the Carolinas', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 4.

'left its skin upon the floor' in 'Farewell to Florida'[933]; to the 'sense of the serpent in you, Ananke', of 'Like Decorations'[934]; to that terrible encounter with the 'bodiless' 'serpent' with 'Skin flashing' in 'The Auroras of Autumn'.[935] Whether derived from romanticism, Nietzsche, Müller or Parmenides, Stevens is enacting a fiction that he chooses to believe, even though he knows it to be a fiction.

In his comparative mythology, Hughes notes of the idea of the woman of 'Complete Being' that:

In her later forms, throughout the Middle East, she takes on a double existence as Inanna (Ishtar, Astarte, Athtar, etc.), who is Goddess of Love and Reproduction, and as Ereshkigal (Allatu, etc.), who is Goddess of the Underworld. Her consort was Thammuz, or Dumuzi, 'the son of the deep waters', who spent one part of the year in the upper world, with the Love Goddess, and the other part in the Underworld with the Queen of Hell. In the Babylon known to the Hebrew prophets she was Ishtar, whose consort was Thammuz. In Jerusalem, down to the sixth century BC, as the lover of Astoreth, Asherah, or Anath, for whom the Temple was first built, her consort was Thammuz or Baal (Ezekiel heard the woman mourning Thammuz at the north gate). His title was Adonis, 'Lord'.[936]

Kingsley, in a section entitled 'Parmenides and Babylon', implies that the Babylonian woman and her consort is the ultimate origin of the nature of the metaphysics of Parmenides[937]:

What has not so far been adequately emphasised, however, is the fact that not just the motif of a descent to the great Goddess in the underworld but also Parmenides' detailed imagery of guarded doors, gates, bolts, bars, keys, and locks preventing or providing access to the underworld is a central feature of Babylonian cosmic mythology. What is more, the gateways in question are routinely described in Babylonian sources as lying on the paths of the sun and moon - just as Parmenides' guarded gates stand on "the paths of night and day".[938]

[933] Wallace Stevens, 'Farewell to Florida', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 97.
[934] Wallace Stevens, 'Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 122.
[935] Wallace Stevens, 'The Auroras of Autumn', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 355.
[936] Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, p. 6.
[937] Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic - Empedocles and Pythagorian Tradition*, p. 392 - 393.
[938] Ibid., p. 392 - 393.

Kingsley makes the astonishing case that the archaeological evidence suggests that 'Parmenides himself was a priest of Apollo.'[939] Or more specifically, a priest of 'Apollo Oulios - the god who destroys and makes whole'.[940] In mythology, when Apollo killed the Python, he was supposed to have taken on its serpent powers himself. Stevens believed that any conception of a 'god' was a product of the imagination and it seems certain that Barnes' analysis would disagree with Kingsley's assessment. However, something very close to what Kingsley considers to be the Parmenidean model remained. Stevens says that: 'The poet is the priest of the invisible.'[941] It is the same model, but Stevens is self-consciously choosing to believe a fiction.

Read purely as a comparative mythology, Hughes' analysis would suggest that the root of Parmenides' 'philosophy' shares a common ancestry to Greek tragic poetry, as Heidegger and Guthrie's assessments would also imply. Indeed, Hughes considers that Dionysus was a Greek embodiment of the earlier consort, Thammuz.[942] Hughes goes on to elaborate how this line of mythology emerged in ancient Greece as Aphrodite and Adonis, having its parallel in the myth of Actaeon, where, according to Hughes, in both cases the rational heroes are torn to pieces by the enraged 'Queen of Hell' nature of the 'goddess', only to be 'reborn' in the 'oneness' of 'her' 'love', just as the sun appeared to be 'reborn' daily from the 'underworld'. Stevens may well have been familiar with the model of the 'goddess' and the dying and reborn sun 'god' from the pages of Müller, a father of comparative

[939] Peter Kingsley, *Reality*, p. 274.
[940] Ibid., p. 295.
[941] Wallace Stevens, 'Adagia', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 908.
[942] Hughes makes it clear that Dionysus is a type of the dying and reborn Thammuz, that originates from Babylon and the Great Goddess is his Mother (Ishtar). (Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, p. 373.)

mythology, who he had read when he was 'young'.[943] In his *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, Müller elaborates on much of what Hughes utilizes for his own comparative mythology.[944] For example, Müller notes that:

Another female goddess is *Ashtoreth* or Ashtaroth (plural), a name which presupposes a masculine deity, Ashtor. Traces of this god or goddess have been discovered in the *Ishtar* of the Babylonian inscriptions, where Ishtar is always feminine, the Queen of heaven and earth.[945]

Adorno suggests that:

The catagories by which Western philosophy defined its everlasting natural order marked the spots once occupied by Oncus and Persephone, Ariadne and Nereus. The pre-Socratic cosmologies conserve the moment of transition.[946]

In 'Certain Phenomena of Sound' there may be evidence of Stevens' consciousness of a rebirth into the Babylonian matriarch as the ultimate ground of a universal fiction:

> I write *Semiramide* and in the script
> I am and have a being and play a part.
> You are that white Eulalia of the name.[947]

Vaught Brogan notes that, 'the "vital I" is potentially reduced to a linguistic sign inscribed in the word *Semiramide*.'[948] In legend, Semiramis was purported to be the woman who established and built "Babylon".[949] Indeed, *Semiramide* is the name of Rossini's opera, itself based upon Voltaire's tragedy, *Semiramis*. With one hand Stevens is denying her name as just a 'word' - 'You were created of your name'. Yet with the other, in the 'dark-syllabled' name of that same 'script', he says, 'I am and

[943] A Letter to Leonard C. van Geyzel, December 9th, 1940. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 381.
[944] Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion; Four Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institution, in February and May 1870* (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1882), pp. 114 - 118.
[945] Ibid., p. 116.
[946] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 5 - 6.
[947] Wallace Stevens, 'Certain Phenomena of Sound', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 257.
[948] Jacqueline Vaught Brogan, *The Violence Within The Violence Without - Wallace Stevens and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Poetics*, p. 19.
[949] Simon Price and Emily Kearns, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Classical Myth & Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 504 - 505.

have a being and play a part.'[950] 'Semiramide' is seen as a root of all things as fictions to which Stevens reduces the rational 'I'. According to Hughes, this kind of reduction enacts the mythology that informs Greek tragic poetry, as the symbolic 'death' and 'rebirth' collapses the subjective self into the 'oneness' of the 'goddess'. Indeed, the case would seem definitive when we consider Stevens' reference to the 'white Eulalia of the name'. Cook makes the connection to St. Eulalia, but also to the Greek *eulalon*, which means "sweetly spoken", as well as being 'one name of Apollo'.[951] This equates with Bloom's assessment that the *Harmonium* poem, 'Tea at the Palaz of Hoon', enacts 'the re-birth of the poet as Apollo.'[952] In 'Certain Phenomena of Sound' the rebirth of the consort (Apollo) into the dual aspect 'goddess' appears to facilitate the kinds of connections that Stevens has consistently associated with *being*, such as connecting the 'dark' and the 'white' and the French language to English as one 'whole' language.

With this in mind we will now proceed to read Stevens' enacting of the model of Attic Greek tragedy through the lens of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). From this analysis I seek to demonstrate that a belief in a totalizing myth produces a violent reduction of the 'self', and to agree with Adorno that the 'oneness' of 'being' is always conceptual. Indeed, my line of argument will concur with Adorno and Horkheimer, who in their work entitled *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, see such a return to myth as inevitable for 'enlightenment' thinking.[953] This process will stand as a critique of Vattimo's desire to not 'return' to Parmenides, but to move into a post-modernism characterised by a complete hermeneutics that is not interested in

[950] Wallace Stevens, 'Certain Phenomena of Sound', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 256 - 257.
[951] Eleanor Cook, *A Reader's Guide to Wallace Stevens*, p. 173.
[952] Harold Bloom, *Yeats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 37.
[953] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xvi.

revisiting what Parmenides actually means by 'truth'. How then does the unity of the 'goddess' appear in Stevens as what I am calling 'the play of violence'?

Stevens shows himself to be aware of the Greek 'art-worlds' of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, when he says in 'Two Prefaces' (1956) that:

> M. Séchan speaks of the fact that both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were influential forces at the time when Valéry was maturing. But he regards *Dance and the Soul* as Apollonian rather than Dionysian, because as Apollonian it corresponds better with the Greek genius.[954]

Leggett argues that the Apollonian and the Dionysian are evident in Stevens' early poetry. In a chapter entitled 'Apollonian and Dionysian in *Harmonium*', Leggett writes extensively of Stevens' use of these two 'art-worlds', making observations such as:

> In opposition to the Apollonian persona of "Hymn to a Watermelon Pavilion" who conveys the dreamworld of phenomena, the persona of "Peter Quince" receives the Dionysian knowledge of that which exists behind phenomena.[955]

In what follows I will attempt to illuminate additional examples of how the union of the Apollonian and the Dionysian in the 'goddess', forms the structure of certain poems. In doing this I wish to show that the mythological forms of Greek tragic poetry parallel the forms of pre-Socratic poetic conceptions: that the 'antagonism' between the Apollonian and the Dionysian is akin to the *polemos* between the imagination and reality, between seeming and *being*, between the rational and irrational and between sculpture and music. Further that this *polemos* is only neutralized in the oneness of the mythical 'goddess' (*being* as a single unity) in whom all things are forcibly reduced to a totalitarian fiction.

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[954] Wallace Stevens, 'Two Prefaces', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 891.
[955] B.J. Leggett, *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext*, p. 82.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche initially defines the separate 'art-worlds' of the Apollonian and the Dionysian respectively, as 'sculpture' and the 'non-plastic' 'art of music'.[956] It is the coupling of these two 'art-worlds' that creates the phenomenon known as Attic tragedy according to Nietzsche:

> These two distinct tendencies run parallel to each other, for the most part openly at variance; and they continually incite each other to new and more powerful births, which perpetuate an antagonism, only superficially reconciled by the common term "Art"; till at last, by a metaphysical miracle of the Hellenic will, they appear coupled with each other, and through this coupling eventually generate the art-product, equally Dionysian and Apollonian, of Attic tragedy.[957]

Nietzsche's use of the phrase 'powerful births' is reminiscent of Heidegger's sense that these same 'forces' were 'powerful'.[958] Such 'power' is only associated with annihilation and 'rebirth' into a fiction. Leggett suggests of the *Harmonium* poem, 'Peter Quince at the Clavier', that:

> music is identified with the form-destroying Dionysian impulse; it is identified with desire, and music/desire is the force that moves the poem, the agency of change. The relation between music and scene in the poem is not that between lyric and narrative but rather between two resources of the lyric - the musical mood as the language of feeling and the image or scene as the form given to feeling. The shifts in tone and mood correspond to the shifts in imagery, and these suggest the stages of the transformation of the speaker, who moves from Apollonian individuality to Dionysian oneness to the Dionyso-Apollonian affirmation of the world of becoming that ends the poem.[959]

Stevens had said of poem XI of 'Blue Guitar' that: 'The chord destroys its elements by uniting them in the chord. They then cease to exist separately.'[960] In 'The Glass of Water' Stevens had written that, 'The *metaphysica*, the plastic parts of poems/ Crash in the mind'.[961] The constant struggle of the unifying nature of music and the plastic

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[956] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1995), p. 1.
[957] Ibid., p. 1.
[958] Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 112.
[959] B.J. Leggett, *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext*, pp. 81 - 82.
[960] A Letter to Hi Simons, August 10th, 1940. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 363.
[961] Wallace Stevens, 'The Glass of Water', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 182.

images of art, are evidently involved in an antithetical struggle in Stevens' verse, that are ultimately united in the fiction of the 'goddess'.

If we think of Stevens' poetry in this context, then it is possible to argue that the plastic 'arts' had come head to head with unbounded nature in the *Harmonium* poem, 'Anecdote of the Jar'. We might suggest that as with Keats' 'urn', the dominance of the sterile Apollonian plastic form has left the Dionysian inert at its exterior ('no longer wild').[962] Stevens appears to be somewhat mocking Keats' poem, suggesting that art needs to involve the antagonism of the two 'art-worlds', not the dominance of the Apollonian. As Stevens' art develops the Dionysian aspect will be used to destroy Keats' Apollonian-centric romanticism in an effort to induce the rebirth that incorporates both 'art-worlds' as non-anthropomorphic, metaphysical concepts. Stevens' *poesis* shows acute consciousness of the import of the relation between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, in a similar way as the Greeks had coupled them in creating tragedy in the unity of the conceptual 'goddess'.

Nietzsche shows that for ancient Greek thinking the Apollonian 'rationalism', manifested as the 'I' of the rational ego, is constantly at war with the Dionysian reduction of everything to the 'Primal Unity'.[963] In an essay of 1948, 'Imagination as Value', Stevens had written that: 'What, then, is it to live in the mind with the imagination, yet not too near to the foundations of its rhetoric…Only the reason stands between it and the reality for which the two are engaged in a struggle.'[964] Stevens had mounted an attack on the rationalists from his first collection. The confrontation with 'reason' came either overtly: 'Rationalists, wearing square hats,/

[962] Wallace Stevens, 'Anecdote of the Jar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 61.
[963] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, pp. 11 - 12.
[964] Wallace Stevens, 'Imagination as Value', *The Necessary Angel, Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 729.

Think, in square rooms'[965], or more fundamentally with the collapse of the ego into the 'evilly compounded, vital I'[966], into the amorphous unity ('One must have a mind of winter').[967]

Of course, Heidegger has argued that Nietzsche is the last in a long line of 'metaphysicians' who inadvertently advocate a subjectivity locked out of the question of the 'meaning' of *being*.[968] In his four volume work on Nietzsche, originally offered as four lecture courses between 1936 to 1940 at the University of Freiburg-im-Breisgau, Heidegger argues that Nietzsche's philosophy remains embroiled in the old problems of metaphysics, which addresses beings and not the meaning of *Being*.[969] It is the aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy such as 'The Will To Power', 'nihilism', 'the superman' and the 'Eternal Return of the Same' etc., that leads Heidegger to conclude that Nietzsche is the last in a long line of metaphysicians still excluded from the first question of philosophy, concerning the meaning of *being*. However, judging from Heidegger's own assertions about *being* and seeming in Attic Greek tragedy, as well as his own destruction of 'man' in favour of *Dasein*, Nietzsche's early work on tragedy suggests that Heidegger and Nietzsche share an influence from a common 'mythic' ground (which for Vattimo, curiously amounts to 'aspects of truth').[970]

The key to unlocking one of the widest vistas onto the highly nuanced philosophy of Nietzsche and Heidegger is arguably found in their deep study and adoration of the pre-Socratics, Attic tragedy and the world of the ancient

[965] Wallace Stevens, 'Six Significant Landscapes', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 60.
[966] Wallace Stevens, 'The Poems of Our Climate', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 179.
[967] Wallace Stevens, 'The Snow Man', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 8.
[968] Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche – Volumes One and Two*, trans. by David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 18.
[969] Ibid., p. 18.
[970] Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, p. 1.

Greeks. According to the arguments put forward in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche's promotion of the Dionysian establishes a 'Primal Unity'.[971] This 'Primal Unity' is conceived from within the terms of what Nietzsche had elsewhere called the 'Mythical Preliminary Stage of Philosophy' at Delphi, the site of the cult of the dying and reborn 'god'.[972] We have to consider that when Nietzsche in the mask of Zarathustra spoke 'thus' to the personified sun and went 'down', he was taking onto himself the mythical model of the Dionysian 'inner being' of Apollo, who sank into the underworld (on 'the paths of night and day') in order to reground humanity in a universal fiction for the perpetual remaking of the self[973]:

Therefore must I descend into the deep: as thou doest in the evening, when thou goest behind the sea, and givest light also to the nether-world, thou exuberant star!

Like thee must I go *down*, as men say, to whom I shall descend.[974]

This aligning of the subjective self with the model of Apollo who in Greek myth descends nightly to the 'nether-world' of Tartarus where the 'goddess' 'is', in order to be 'reborn', may just be a metaphor for the rays of 'knowledge' descending to humanity, but only a 'knowledge' that operates according to the originating mythology of Dionysus being the 'dying and reborn inner being of Apollo', or as Nietzsche signed himself in the letters he wrote after his collapse in Turin in 1881, 'the Crucified one', or 'Dionysus'.[975]

It is from the enlarged ground of the dead 'god' ('Apollo'), presumably chosen for its total 'otherness' to the Biblical account of the resurrection to eternal

[971] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, pp. 11.
[972] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, p. 10.
[973] Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic - Empedocles and Pythagorian Tradition*, p. 392 - 393.
[974] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. by Thomas Common (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1997), p. 3.
[975] Richard Schacht, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality – Essays on Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), p. 234.

life, that Nietzsche suggests 'the first *decent* human being'[976] will emerge, a 'superman'.[977] I would argue that this 'superman' is conceived as 'the *sacrifice* of its highest types to its own inexhaustibility', as what Nietzsche calls the 'Dionysian'.[978] It is what Nietzsche further refers to as '*being oneself* the eternal joy of becoming, that joy that also encompasses the *joy of* destruction.'[979] If '*being oneself*' is being 'the eternal joy of becoming', then what Nietzsche calls "the concept of 'being'" as a stasis, is passed over in favour of an ontology of becoming and struggle.[980]

In accordance with the Dionysian terms, Nietzsche embraces the destruction of 'self' in favour of the amorphous ontology of universal life *and* death. This is in line with Nietzsche's very clear rejection of the Son of God in favour of the 'sun god', or at least 'his' dancing Dionysian 'inner-being'. Further, Nietzsche also determines that this rebirth into an ontological ground of flux as 'this doctrine of Zarathustra's', '*could* also have been taught already by Heraclitus.'[981] The 'rebirth' is not conceived as a rebirth to rationally conscious life, rather it is a 'rebirth' into the blind 'otherness' of life and death in meaningless cycle. The 'Dionysian' is a 'yes' saying to that cycle at the expense of the rational self.

This 'yes' saying is of course not religion for Nietzsche, as for Stevens, it is what they, like Parmenides and Heraclitus (in their different ways) call 'reality', though it is inherited from Greek religion, presented as religion and speaks in religious terms. The conception that 'God *is dead*'[982], or in Stevens' terms 'the death

[976] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. by Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 88.
[977] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, p. 6.
[978] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 47.
[979] Ibid., p. 47.
[980] Ibid., p. 48.
[981] Ibid., p. 48.
[982] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, p. 5.

of one god is the death of all'[983], is never the end of mythology. Rather, under its own terms of *conception* it is only the collapse of the consort (‘Apollo’) into the unity of the ‘goddess’ who, according to myth, 'causes the gods to fall and become incarnate in a cycle of births', as an ultimate fictional ground lodged at the base of Western metaphysics.[984] ‘Man’ may have assumed the place of these mythical ‘gods’ (who lead not to ‘life’, but to renewal into the amorphous cycles of the universe under ‘Necessity’), but the machinery remains the same, because the rebirth is into a purported enlargement of ‘reality’ (the ‘goddess’) that includes ‘good’ and ‘evil’.

We may maintain that for Nietzsche and Stevens this model remains conceptual; I do not contest that at all, but it still remains a fiction that retains its original mythic violence against the extant 'self', who in reality is present in advance of all myth making. Violence is retained because the ‘rebirth’ we are being asked to make is into a reductive concept of the non-anthropomorphic, blind reality, from which the artist can paint an enlarged sense of ‘human’. Such writing may be called *pharmakon*, at once poison and ‘cure’ (‘of the ground’).[985] It is that which in Derrida’s sense puts ‘play’ into ‘play’.[986]

Arguably, Western metaphysics was founded upon a poetic fiction that began with the Pre-Socratics and Heidegger's ‘reduction of metaphysics’, like Stevens' own, is only an enacting of *more mythology* as Adorno's thought would suggest.[987] By diverting philosophy into the question of the ‘meaning’ of *being*, Heidegger has already accepted the myth of the concept of *being* as a ‘oneness’ inherited from Parmenides. I would argue that Heidegger’s philosophy conceptually begins where

[983] Wallace Stevens, ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 329.
[984] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 191.
[985] Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (London & New York: Continuum, 1981), p. 98.
[986] Ibid., p. 97.
[987] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 118 - 119.

Parmenides' ends, after the 'rebirth' from the 'underworld' where the unification is founded according to the myth. Stevens had denied that Nietzsche's 'superman' was a model for 'major man', and the Empedoclean and Xenophanean models seemed to confirm that.[988] However, I would suggest that the myth that Nietzsche is using in generating the imagined 'superman' is ultimately connected to the myth that underlies Parmenides' descent to the 'goddess' in the 'underworld', Empedocles' death and 'rebirth' into complete *being* and the amorphous, non-anthropomorphic 'god' of the protestant Xenophanes, as advocates of the 'One'.[989] If Stevens and Nietzsche lend themselves to comparison in any defining way, then arguably it is as figures who reject inherited forms of religion on the terms of an inherited *form* of Greek poetic 'religion', that allows for the perpetual making of oneself as a new fiction. It is the *perpetuum-mobile* of modernism.

If Nietzsche's philosophy embraced the myth of the role of the consort through his own aligning of his subjective self with the non-subjective 'otherness' of the Dionysian 'Primal Unity' (as a name for the enlarged reality that cannot be named), then under the same model, or in this case, parallel, Heidegger's philosophy embraces the 'Goddess of Complete Being' as 'truth' via Parmenides. That is why Heidegger appears to be at odds with Nietzsche, because Nietzsche focuses on the Dionysian moment of destruction and abides in it, though in the wider vista of the complete mythology, it becomes clear how they are connected. Gadamer notes that the 'true predecessor' of Heidegger 'was neither Dilthey nor Husserl, then, but rather *Nietzsche*'.[990] This may indicate why Vattimo would sense this connection, though he proceeds to erroneously call it 'truth'. Stevens' poetry urges Apollo to 'slumber

[988] A Letter to Henry Church, June 12th, 1942. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 409.
[989] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 119.
[990] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 248.

and die' and then advances the universal 'pure power' of the 'first idea', through which 'major man' is born[991], 'understanding' that 'the irrational is rational'.[992] The reader is being 'played' in ways that cannot be fully grasped without the perspective of the original driving *concept*, as demonstrated in Altieri's enthusiastic acceptance that, 'as we entertain the "as" we become figures of desire participating in the life of major man.'[993] Of course in Stevens, the antagonism between the Apollonian and the Dionysian continues to incite them to 'new and more powerful births' as they are united in the model of the 'Goddess of Complete Being'.[994]

It was the rational 'I' who had placed the jar in Tennessee and it was the rationally constructed jar that made nature 'slovenly'.[995] This provides an answer to some musings by Riddel, who wonders:

Just how the jar, an artefact, comes to represent the intellect is not clear.....In any event, jar clashes with "slovenly wilderness".[996]

Certainly the jar 'comes to represent the intellect' and the rational intellect is itself a signifier of the Greek Apollonian 'art-world', that 'clashes' with the Dionysian sway of unbounded nature. Stevens' word 'dominion' (the jar 'took dominion everywhere') does not seem to imply man's 'dominion' over the earth, as set down at Eden, but it implies the assertive ('took') 'dominion' of the Apollonian 'art-world', which is a more primeval ground for Stevens in conjunction with the Dionysian element, to which 'man' and 'garden' are implicitly reduced as we saw in the last chapter.[997] This defines the destructive struggle between the two 'art-worlds'

[991] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 329 - 331.
[992] Ibid., p. 351.
[993] Charles Altieri, 'Why Stevens Must be Abstract', *Wallace Stevens: the Poetics of Modernism*, p. 112.
[994] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 1.
[995] Wallace Stevens, 'Anecdote of the Jar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 60.
[996] Joseph N. Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens*, p. 43.
[997] Wallace Stevens, 'Anecdote of the Jar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 61.

within the bond of the *poesis* as the ultimate ground of Stevens' reductive, universal fiction.

From this line of hypothesis we can surmise further about Stevens' 1944 critique of Allan Tate for not having enough of the peasant about him, stating that for his own part, he (Stevens) 'liked sap and lots of it'.[998] Guthrie clarifies in context of Xenophanes that: 'Bacchus, god of the grape, was god also of all life-giving juices. He made the difference between a pliant, green and sappy bough and a dead, dry and brittle one'.[999] Perhaps this is why the 'pine' and the 'palm' (as evergreens) combined with the metaphysical amount to Stevens' conception of complete *being*? It would appear to be the encounter of this irrational Dionysian element and the 'rational' Apollonian element that 'Anecdote of the Jar' plays out. Keats' 'unravish'd bride' encircled by the 'leaf-fringed legend' that 'haunts' about thy shape in the form of 'wild ecstasy', seems to have been parodied in Stevens' poem as we have said.[1000] What subsequent poems would show is how Stevens was conceptually waiting with 'Bacchus and his pards' to destroy Keats' Apollonian poetics, and in doing so, enact the rebirth of the two into the universal 'oneness' of the 'goddess'.[1001]

In Attic tragedy the antithetical struggle of the 'rational' element with the 'Primal Unity', seems to be a consistent theme.[1002] Nietzsche had argued in *The Birth of Tragedy* that because Prometheus gave fire to man, he must be torn to pieces by vultures, 'because of his excessive wisdom which could solve the riddle of the

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[998] A Letter to Henry Church, January 21st, 1944. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 461.
[999] W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Volume I – The Earlier Presocratics and the Pythagoreans*, pp. 372.
[1000] John Keats, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', *The Works of John Keats*, p. 233.
[1001] Ibid., p. 231.
[1002] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, pp. 11 - 12.

Sphinx, Oedipus must be plunged into a bewildering vortex of crime.'[1003] We might add that because of his rationalising, Pentheus was also torn to pieces. In each case the irrational element overwhelms the rational as both are united through a rebirth in the 'oneness' of the unseen 'goddess'. The reason for this may well prove to be that tragedy for the Greeks was 'part of the rite of Dionysus, the term *tragoidia* (goat song) from which the word tragedy is derived, probably referring to the sacrificial goat.'[1004] However, despite the presence of strong parallels the general consensus among scholars has been that 'there is no satisfactory explanation of this name', and it remains enigmatic.[1005] Yet what we do know for certain is that tragedy was performed at the festival called the 'Great Dionysia' and that the 'tragedians set individual characters, entire plays, and indeed the tragic genre as a whole in a distinct Dionysiac ambience.'[1006]

Stevens' work plays with references to the Greek stage, masks, and festivals, which at times point to something akin to the festival of the 'Great Dionysia'. For example, Stevens had written the following lines (that clearly remember Keats' Grecian urn) in 'The Auroras of Autumn':

> We stand in the tumult of a festival.
>
> What festival? This loud, disordered mooch?
> These hospitaliers? These brute-like guests?
> These musicians dubbing at a tragedy[1007]

The localized *technê* of Keats' Grecian urn, as indicative of the Apollonian subjectivism, is universalised in the destructive Dionysian flow of 'The Auroras of

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[1003] Ibid., p. 11.
[1004] Euripides, *Bacchae*, trans. by, Henry Hart Milman (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 1997), p. v.
[1005] M.C. Howatson and Ian Cilvers, ed., *The Concise Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 548.
[1006] Simon Price and Emily Kearns, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Classical Myth and Religion*, pp. 168 & 172.
[1007] Wallace Stevens, The Auroras of Autumn', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 358 - 359.

Autumn'. This clearly demonstrates how modernism universalised the metaphysics of romanticism as 'truth' (on non-anthropomorphic terms), in this case enlarging its scope by including the Dionysian ravishment that destroys the Apollonian idyll of piping without music, plastic form and the correlation of beauty and truth at the exclusion of the ugly, that Keats' poem proposes.[1008] The romantic project gets re-worked by modernism in part through a playing out of the original terms of the myth, fragments of which are already lodged within the work of certain romantic poets. Whereas Keats' 'swallows' ascend into the sky in the perpetual ripeness of Autumn, Stevens' undulating 'pigeons' 'sink,/ Downward to darkness'.[1009] In other words, Stevens tips the *balance* to first destroy romanticism, only for both 'art-worlds' to be reborn into the 'oneness' of the 'goddess' in an effort to surpass romanticism. This mythology is neither romantic nor modern, it is a historical concept that both 'movements' are using different aspects of, in its Greek tragic form, to achieve their own desired ends.

An additional reference to the Dionysian 'festival' seems to have appeared earlier in 'Blue Guitar':

> In the cathedral, I sat there, and read,
> Alone, a lean Review and said,
>
> "These degustations in the vaults
> Oppose the past and the festival.
>
> What is beyond the cathedral, outside,
> Balances with nuptial song.
>
> So it is to sit and to balance things
> To and to and to the point of still,

[1008] John Keats, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', *The Works of John Keats*, pp. 233 - 234.
[1009] John Keats, 'To Autumn', *The Works of John Keats*, p. 246. & Wallace Stevens, 'Sunday Morning', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 56.

To say of one mask it is like,
To say of another it is like,

To know that the balance does not quite rest,
That the mask is strange, however like."[1010]

In the 'nuptial song' that happens 'outside', 'beyond the cathedral', Stevens seems to speak of the act of balancing the polarities of the masks of Dionysus and Apollo, apparently embracing 'the festival'.

Nietzsche also defines the separate 'art-worlds' of the Apollonian and the Dionysian in terms of 'dreams' and 'drunkenness' respectively.[1011] The 'coupling' of dreams and drunkenness is also apparent in early Stevens, as Howard Pearce has insightfully elucidated:

Only, here and there, an old sailor,
Drunk and asleep in his boots,
Catches tigers
In red weather.[1012]

Pearce, as with the examples uncovered by Leggett, seems perfectly correct to see the Nietzschean conception of this coupling of dreams and drunkenness, as having its origin for Stevens in *The Birth of Tragedy*.[1013] I also agree with Pearce in surmising that: 'The figure of the poet that appears in Nietzsche's thought is made possible by Nietzsche's exploration of the prehistory of the Greek world.'[1014] For Nietzsche it was in 'the drunken reveller Archilochus sunk down in slumber' that these impulses were fused together in the *Bacchae*.[1015] Pearce suggests that: 'The figure of Stevens's old sailor seems in particular to be a reversion to Nietzsche's

[1010] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 148.
[1011] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 1.
[1012] Wallace Stevens, 'Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 53.
[1013] Howard Pearce, 'Poiesis and the Withdrawal: The Garden-Motive in Henry James, Wallace Stevens and David Mamet', *Analecta Husserliana: The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research*, p. 271.
[1014] Ibid., p. 271.
[1015] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 14.

Archilochus'.[1016] Large predatory cats ('tigers') were also an indicator of Dionysus in the ancient Greek world, as of course was intoxication.[1017] The union of this with the slumber and dreams of the Apollonian, demonstrates how Stevens is attempting a 'coupling' of these 'art-worlds' through a *poesis*. The machinery of 'being without description' evokes the unseen 'goddess' who is 'presented' as the ultimate fictional ground.[1018]

The tension between the two 'art-worlds' was never completely resolved in Stevens, though at times a peace of sorts was achieved. Stevens says in 'The Irrational Element in Poetry' that: 'One is always writing about two things at the same time in poetry and it is this that produces the tension characteristic of poetry.'[1019] In 'Of Modern Poetry' Stevens spoke of the 'new stage' with the 'insatiable actor' (tragic actor), performing the 'coupling' of the two 'art-worlds':

> expressed
> In an emotion as of two people, as of two
> Emotions becoming one. The actor is
> A metaphysician in the dark[1020]

Nietzsche had said that it was only 'by a metaphysical miracle of the Hellenic will' that the Apollonian and the Dionysian were 'coupled with each other'.[1021] Stevens is here attempting the 'coupling' of the two 'art-worlds' in a *poesis*, according to the structure of Attic Greek tragedy, which, as we said earlier is also reminiscent of Heraclitus' *polemos*. The proximity of the 'metaphysician in the dark' arguably follows the model of the reduction of the rational self into the 'dark-syllabled' name

[1016] Howard Pearce, 'Poiesis and the Withdrawal: The Garden-Motive in Henry James, Wallace Stevens and David Mamet', *Analecta Husserliana: The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research*, p. 273.
[1017] Nietzsche mentions of the chariot of Dionysus, that 'panthers and tigers pass beneath his yoke'. (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 4.)
[1018] Wallace Stevens, 'The Latest Freed Man', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 187.
[1019] Wallace Stevens, 'The Irrational Element in Poetry', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 785.
[1020] Wallace Stevens, 'Of Modern Poetry', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 219.
[1021] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 1.

of '*Semiramide*'.[1022] 'Of Modern Poetry' presents Stevens directly after the reduction of 'the lion in the lute' and 'the lion locked in stone' to himself, standing upon the stage of a totality grounded in a fiction. Nietzsche defines it in its tragic nature, elucidating the underlying model of the 'metaphysician in the dark', by saying:

> Only in so far as the genius in the act of artistic creation coalesces with this primordial artist of the world, does he catch sight of the eternal essence of art; for in this state he is, in a marvellous manner, like the weird picture of the fairy-tale which can turn its eyes at will and behold itself; he is now at once subject and object, at once poet, actor, and spectator.[1023]

Heidegger presents Nietzsche as having failed to overcome metaphysics.[1024] Yet when Heidegger speaks of the 'powerful' portrayal of 'Being' and 'seeming' in the same terms as Nietzsche speaks of the Apollonian and the Dionysian in *The Birth of Tragedy*, he illuminates the failure of the question of the 'meaning' of *being* to extricate itself from myth, as Adorno has argued.

It is 'the act of artistic creation' coalescing with 'the primordial artist of the world' that puts the single, 'eternal essence' of art into 'play', in very similar terms to Gadamer and Stevens ('act of the mind'/'candor'). Gadamer's sense of 'play' that we identified in chapter one as a model comparable to 'Of Modern Poetry', endorses precisely the same 'unity' that Nietzsche describes in suggesting that 'subject and object' and 'poet, actor, and spectator' are all 'one'. In *Truth and Method* one of Gadamer's relatively few references to Nietzsche mentions him in terms of his 'experimental extremism'.[1025] Yet at the same time, Gadamer seems concerned that Heidegger would criticise his own lack of 'ultimate radicality' in the conclusions

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[1022] Wallace Stevens, 'Certain Phenomena of Sound', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 256 - 257.
[1023] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 17.
[1024] Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche – Volumes One and Two*, p. 18.
[1025] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 535.

drawn in *Truth and Method*.[1026] Standing on the precipice of a mountain top reminiscent of Zarathustra's, Gadamer justifies his restraint with the following remark:

> When science expands into a total technocracy and thus brings on the "cosmic night" of the "forgetfulness of being," the nihilism that Nietzsche prophesied, then may one not gaze at the last fading light of the sun setting in the evening sky, instead of turning around to look for the first shimmer of its return?[1027]

However, like Nietzsche, Gadamer's interpretation of the tragic demonstrates that he is *already* thinking from within the machinery of the myth of 'oneness'. He notes that the spectator of tragedy 'participates in the communion of being present', which would imply an encounter with *being* achieved through a work of tragic art. However, Gadamer's language evidences slippage as he reveals the mythical ground that *existed before* the encounter with the tragic by suggesting that: 'there is more in the continuing effect of such tragic works and themes than merely the continuing influence of a literary model.'[1028] The 'more' than the 'literary model' is complicit with Heidegger's sense of the 'powerful'[1029] struggle in tragedy and Nietzsche's sense of the 'powerful' in the tragic that conceals an 'eternal essence' of art.[1030] The encounter with the work of art may be a representing of 'oneness', but it is only ever the representing of a myth that was *already believed in*, already conceived of as a 'more', as a 'power'. The 'truth' that Gadamer finds in tragic art is a fiction, a violent reductive fiction when asserted as 'truth'.

We noted earlier Shelling's comments in his *System of Transcendental Idealism* that art could 'open' for the philosopher the 'holy of holies', the 'single

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[1026] Ibid., p. xxxiv.
[1027] Ibid., p. xxxiv.
[1028] Ibid., pp. 128 - 129.
[1029] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 1.
[1030] Ibid., p. 17.

flame' of 'eternal and original unity', 'that which in nature and history is rent asunder'.[1031] For Schelling 'philosophy was born and nourished by poetry in the infancy of knowledge' and his expectation was that knowledge in 'completion' would 'flow back like so many individual streams into the universal ocean of poetry', a poetry moreover that is founded upon what Schelling calls an undivided 'mythology'.[1032] It is not a question of any reductive danger lurking in art as a fiction; rather it is a question of the implications of fiction becoming a *ground for reality* through a violent reduction.

The difficulty Stevens appears to have encountered at times, was retaining the balance between the two 'art-worlds'. In the late poem, 'The Course of a Particular', Stevens notes that: 'though one says that one is part of everything,/ There is a conflict, there is a resistance involved'.[1033] The conflict comes in the plasticity of the hard-edged 'res-istance'. In unveiling his 'rock' in 'Credences of Summer', Stevens had attempted to bind 'The physical pine' and 'the metaphysical pine' together as a static apex ('fix it in eternal foliage', 'with arrested peace', 'Joy of such permanence').[1034] Critics have noted the tensions resulting in triumph and sadness in this poem, sadness particularly in the latter sections. For example, Bloom states that: '*Credences* is a celebratory poem, but the celebration is thwarted by the rival eloquence of mere nature, which resists being reimagined.'[1035] I would argue that it is possible to read the poem in a way that suggests that it is the sudden dominance of the barbaric 'Dionysian' 'art-world' that causes the melancholy for Stevens, who is trying to unite the physical and the metaphysical in a *poesis*. The two 'art-worlds',

[1031] F.W.J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, p. 231.
[1032] Ibid., p. 232.
[1033] Wallace Stevens, 'The Course of a Particular', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 460.
[1034] Wallace Stevens, 'Credences of Summer', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 322 - 323.
[1035] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, pp. 243 - 244.

whether presented as 'philosophic' or mythic, will apparently not stay coupled for long and a return to extreme violence ensues, as the one annihilates the other. Altieri again seems to celebrate Stevens' poems of bare reality that highlight the compounding of the imagination, on the basis that they help us in 'ritually manifesting where we are positioned.'[1036]

Bloom maintains that the 'They' of canto VII is 'the Romantics, but Stevens also', however canto VII in my reading incorporates the Maenads meeting with Pentheus, the 'Dionysian' impulse overpowering the 'rational' element[1037]:

> Far in the woods they sang their unreal songs,
> Secure. It was difficult to sing in face
> Of the object. The singers had to avert themselves
> Or else avert the object. Deep in the woods
> They sang of summer in the common fields.
>
> They sang desiring an object that was near,
> In face of which desire no longer moved,
> Nor made of itself that which it could not find…
> Three times the concentred self takes hold, three times
> The thrice concentred self, having possessed
>
> The object, grips it in savage scrutiny,
> Once to make captive, once to subjugate
> Or yield to subjugation, once to proclaim
> The meaning of the capture, this hard prize,
> Fully made, fully apparent, fully found.[1038]

This is the death of Pentheus in my reading, with its clear parallel in Orpheus's own demise at the hands of the Maenads. The three triumphal moments denoted by the accumulation of the word 'once', is the rending of Pentheus' head, gripped in the 'savage scrutiny'.[1039] In Greek mythology, Dionysus and Pentheus are both born of

[1036] Charles Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Modernism and After*, p. 146.
[1037] Ibid., p. 251.
[1038] Wallace Stevens, 'Credences of Summer', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 325.
[1039] Euripides, *Bacchae*, pp. 42 - 44.

daughters of Cadmus, and they are in effect the rational and irrational tensions that remain *connected* as cousins.[1040] It is the music of the 'unreal songs' that are in tension with the rational 'face/ Of the object', that which is plastic and has rational form.[1041] The word 'face' for how an object shows itself recalls Levinas' thesis that the sway of Heideggerian and Parmenidean 'ontology' reduces the face of the 'Other' to mere 'otherness', and that this is violent. It is comparable to another example found in 'Blue Guitar' where Stevens had sought 'A dream' 'in which/ I can believe'.[1042] The belief in this dream was also to take place 'in face of the object' in a further attempt to 'play' the two 'art-worlds' together as one, a process of reduction that annihilates the subjective self according to the older fiction of the 'goddess' who 'Must' come first.[1043] It was only after Stevens had brought 'the lion in the lute' 'Before' the face of 'the lion locked in stone' and reduced himself to this unity of 'otherness', that he could 'face' the men and women of the time in 'Of Modern Poetry', to 'play' them into the same enlarged ground.[1044] This is why Stevens' ritual manifestations do not show us 'where we are positioned', as Altieri suggests, rather they 'play' us into a ground of mythic violence.

In a sense, 'It Must be Abstract' and 'It Must Change' can be read as representative of the Apollonian and the Dionysian respectively, on apparently non-mythic terms. This fusion of the two halves of 'reality' 'Must Give Pleasure' as a

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[1040] M.C. Howatson and Ian Cilvers, eds., *The Concise Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, p. 79.

[1041] Critchley seems correct to suggest that Stevens' perspective of the tensions between what might be called 'idealism' and 'realism' could have been embellished by his reading of Maurice Blanchot's essays in *Nouvelle Revue Française*, perhaps even introducing Stevens to the thought of Levinas concerning the face. (Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are – Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, p. 86).

[1042] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 143.

[1043] Ibid., p. 143.

[1044] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' & 'Of Modern Poetry', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 143 & 218 – 219.

tragic form in the moment in which they appear to be coupled through the 'death' of 'Apollo' which begins the whole work. In reality it is the machinery of an absolute reductive violence, as demonstrated in 'The Auroras of Autumn' when the agent of change in 'Ananke' overwhelmed reality at rest for Stevens. Kingsley suggests of Parmenides' 'goddess' that: 'One face of the goddess is movement; the other, utter stillness.'[1045] Before Stevens enacted the death of Apollo in poem I of 'It Must Be Abstract', he addressed this woman:

> In the uncertain light of single, certain truth,
> Equal in living changingness to the light
> In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,
> For a moment in the central of our being[1046]

For this Ananke Stevens says 'I feel love' and what 'she' brought to him was 'peace'. For 'her', Stevens would 'press the extremest book of the wisest man' 'Close' to him, 'hidden' in him, like Empedocles' poetic knowledge of the 'One': 'For these things grow of themselves into thy heart'.[1047] Indeed it was Empedocles who had claimed to be an 'eternal' 'exile and a wanderer from the gods' by an 'oracle of Necessity, an ancient ordinance of the gods' that resulted in him 'being born throughout the time in all manners of mortal forms', given up to 'insensate strife'.[1048] In 'Owl's Clover' Stevens had referred to the 'hymn', 'psalm', and 'cithern song of praise' to 'Fateful Ananke', as 'the exile of the disinherited'.[1049]

Nietzsche suggests that for the Greeks, the tensions between the Apollonian and the Dionysian also erupted in the notion of 'transfiguration':

But if we observe how, under the pressure of this treaty of peace, the Dionysian power revealed itself, we shall now recognise in the Dionysian orgies of the Greeks,

[1045] Peter Kingsley, *Reality*, p. 220.
[1046] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 329.
[1047] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 221.
[1048] Ibid., p. 222.
[1049] Wallace Stevens, 'Owl's Clover', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 162.

as compared with the Babylonian Sacaea with their reversion of man to the tiger and the ape, the significance of festivals of world-redemption and days of transfiguration.[1050]

For Stevens it was 'lions' and 'oxen' and 'bears' that illustrated the oneness of all things, the tension of the volcanic heart of 'corazon' (the 'center'/'underworld') with which he enacted an alignment:

> He is like a man
> In the body of a violent beast.
> Its muscles are his own…[1051]

In 'The Latest Freed Man' Stevens would enact a transformation into what resembled the imagined ox 'deity' of Xenophanes, who's own 'deity' was the amorphous 'One'. The imperative, as we have suggested was that it was an 'ox-like struggle', which denotes *polemos* or in the mythic terms, 'transfiguration' under the 'pressure' of the 'treaty of peace'.[1052] As struggle, *polemos* is a violence against the violence of the 'pure power' of amorphous *being*. To reduce to either 'state' is to destroy the individual and its terms are derived from the myth of 'Necessity', who contains the warring elements of both *being* and change.

Nietzsche provides a language for this 'being an ox', this 'being without description':

Thus far we have considered the Apollonian and its antithesis, the Dionysian, as artistic energies which burst forth from nature herself, *without the mediation of the human artist*; energies in which nature's art-impulses are satisfied in the most immediate and direct way: first, on the one hand, in the pictorial world of dreams, whose completeness is not dependent upon the intellectual attitude or the artistic culture of any single being; and, on the other hand, as drunken reality, which likewise does not heed the single unit, but even seeks to destroy the individual and redeem him by a mystic feeling of Oneness.[1053]

[1050] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 6.
[1051] Wallace Stevens, 'Poetry is a Destructive Force', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 178.
[1052] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 6.
[1053] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 5.

To achieve 'Oneness', the 'art-worlds' must first close together (as they had for the 'latest freed man' on the edge of the bed, between dreams and reality), and 'destroy the individual'. It is in this sense that Ziarek is incorrect to justify these modes of thought in Stevens, via Heidegger's "attempt to refashion 'man' and thought in a non-anthropic manner", because this argument completely overlooks their very real origins with primal, mythic violence.[1054] This is not the unfolding of *being*; it is a historical, human concept, the embracing of *mythos*. Clearly we should review the origins of such thought before entertaining Altieri's Modernist enthusiasm that 'we must lean further into this enchanting sight.'[1055]

The violence of the Heraclitean struggle (*polemos*) of individual beings to establish themselves out of *being* is certainly present in Stevens as an animalistic struggle that announces itself as part of nature, as it had for Heraclitus. In 'Notes' it is the 'lion' who 'Defies red emptiness to evolve his match' and the 'elephant' who 'Breaches the darkness of Ceylon with blares'.[1056] The implication is that both animals have struggled forth out of the 'One', in a mode of violence: 'There was a muddy centre before we breathed'.[1057] Interestingly, Jeff Wallace in his introduction to the 1998 edition of *The Origin of Species* (1859) notes with regard to Darwin's theory that: "A philosophical tradition can be traced back at least to the early Greek philosopher Heraclitus' conception of the world in a perpetual state of flux or 'fire'."[1058]

[1054] Krzysztof Ziarek, 'Without human meaning': Stevens, Heidegger and the Foreignness of Poetry', *Wallace Stevens Across the Atlantic*, p. 90.
[1055] Charles Altieri, 'Why Stevens Must be Abstract', *Wallace Stevens: the Poetics of Modernism*, p. 115.
[1056] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 332.
[1057] Ibid., p. 331.
[1058] Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1998), Introduction p. IX.

Stevens denied both the anthropomorphic conception of the 'gods' and paganism as we have seen. Riddel notes: 'Rejecting the "pagan in a varnished car," the poet is left without a deity but not without the guitar.'[1059] However, paradoxically, the rhythms of paganism that had once animated Attic Greek tragedy are firmly in place, if only for 'playing' upon the 'guitar'; in other words, for making into 'art'. Fusing the Apollonian and the Dionysian in a *poesis* is not a religious act for Stevens; it is an 'artistic' one. Concepts do fall into history as Adorno had suggested, *mythos* however remains a consistent spectre to which the mind can apply varying forms, but unlike the universality of *mythos* with which Heidegger's ontology and Gadamer's hermeneutics have a dialogue, *mythos* is surely not universal and may equally be rejected by the liberty of the individual mind when that *mythos* is presented as reductive 'truth'.

In terms of a model for the 'supreme fiction', Stevens had said that 'the greatest piece of fiction' was 'Greek mythology'.[1060] However, the effort of Stevens' *poesis* is to universalize the terms of the myth to the 'ontological' level, so that they are allowed to extend far beyond the theatre of art (and beyond the anthropomorphic forms of the 'gods' found in romanticism). This is why the images of the old tragic theatres in Stevens' poems are usually collapsed or collapsing, as Stevens de-creates the paraphernalia of the old platform for these 'art-worlds' and universalizes his fiction to include 'reality' as well. This is 'violent' because it is an enforced reduction of extant reality to *mythos*. In 'Repetitions of a Young Captain' Stevens would write:

> A tempest cracked on the theatre. Quickly,
> The wind beat in the roof and half the walls.

[1059] Joseph N. Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens*, p. 141.
[1060] Wallace Stevens, 'Adagia', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 915.

The ruin stood still in an external world.

It had been real. It was something overseas
That I remembered, something that I remembered
Overseas, that stood in an external world.

It had been real. It was not now. The rip
Of the wind and the glittering were real now,
In the spectacle of a new reality.[1061]

Stevens is universalizing the Greek tragic stage and reducing reality to the terms of *mythos*.[1062]

Ziarek states that:

For Heidegger nihilation is the enabling force of letting-be, which makes it possible for beings to be what they are, and frees them from the ways in which power articulates the spatio-temporal play of experience into entities, objects or facts. Nihilation is neither the power of negation nor the powerlessness of inactivity, but instead the power-free unfolding of 'being'.[1063]

Just as near the end of his life Stevens thinks that Heidegger is 'Swiss', so this reading is detached from the symbiosis of *mythos* and early Greek poetic philosophy.[1064] Stevens' effort to reduce the ground of reality to the fiction of the 'goddess' is violent because it is an enforced reduction on universal, 'ontological' terms. Hence Stevens' use of the words 'cracked', 'beat' and 'rip' to redefine the 'new reality' as the 'glittering' 'spectacle' of a universal fiction. What has been unfolded in poetry can equally be folded up again by the poet. In precisely this sense Stevens had said that: 'Suppose the poet discovered and had the power thereafter at will and by intelligence to reconstruct us by his transformations. He would also have

[1061] Wallace Stevens, 'Repititions of a Young Captain', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 271.
[1062] The possibility arises that the 'tempest' refers to Shakespeare's departure from the art of tragedy following his last play of that name.
[1063] Krzysztof Ziarek, 'Without human meaning': Stevens, Heidegger and the Foreignness of Poetry', *Wallace Stevens Across the Atlantic*, p. 90.
[1064] A Letter to Paule Vidal, July 29th, 1952. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 758.

the power to destroy us.'[1065] What Ziarek and Critchley fail to observe with regard to what they see as the 'powerlessness' of Stevens' ontological poetry, is that Stevens has clearly placed his own intellect ('intelligence') and human 'will' between himself and his audience, and that he is absolutely conscious of the 'power' of the poet to press back and 'destroy us', even if he is pressing back with "the power-free unfolding of 'being'."[1066]

In the posthumously published, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, Nietzsche says of Heraclitus that:

What he saw, the teaching of *law in becoming* and the *play of necessity*, must be seen from now on in all eternity. He raised the curtain on this greatest of all dramas.[1067]

Equally, the 'new' theatre Stevens envisages is entirely universal, presented in a form more familiar to the pre-Socratics whose cosmological poetry collapses reality into a ground of *mythos*:

> It is a theatre floating through the clouds,
> Itself a cloud, although of misted rock
> And mountains running like water, wave on wave[1068]

This 'misted rock' is the 'rock' of what I have argued is a sense of complete *being*, in all of its 'otherness'. The role of modern poetry for Stevens is to stand at the heart of 'reality', in place of the old Greek tragic theatre and to universalize its form precisely. The 'metaphysician in the dark' replaces the tragic 'actor' and 'plays' the audience into the ground of that universal *mythos*, into the unity of the model of the 'goddess', the final fiction that Stevens chooses to believe, knowing it to be a

[1065] Wallace Stevens, 'The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet', *The Necessary Angel, Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 670.
[1066] Krzysztof Ziarek, 'Without human meaning': Stevens, Heidegger and the Foreignness of Poetry', *Wallace Stevens Across the Atlantic*, p. 90.
[1067] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, trans. by Marianne Cowan (Washington DC: Regency Publishing, Inc., 1962), p. 68.
[1068] Wallace Stevens, 'The Auroras of Autumn', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 359.

fiction.[1069] The mythological names that the Greeks used have gone. The precise model of their mythic structure is entirely retained in Stevens' poetry.

In essence, the reduction of existence to an imagined ground is no different in implication than Hannah Arendt's contention in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) that German National Socialism was a reduction of history to racial struggle, and Marxism was a reduction of history to class struggle. It is the reduction to a totalizing myth that destroys individuality. We may offer an answer to Levinas' question of the connection between *Mein Kampf* and *Being and Time* as follows[1070]: where humanity is reduced to the terms of blind fate ('Necessity'/'Ananke') as a catalyst for a compulsion to total 'struggle' matched only by the competing and equally urgent compulsion of the same 'blind fate' for a totality of absolute 'oneness', a *complete annihilation* is established over and against existence. Both reductions destroy the individual and when operating at once, resemble totalitarian 'government'. Heidegger politicized his engagement in this myth when he made the catastrophic error of trying to play philosopher king to the National Socialists. To a far lesser degree, Stevens politicized his own advancement of the myth when he suggested that: 'The defeat or triumph of Hitler are parts of a war-like whole'.[1071]

Despite the myth playing out as a human construct, there is nothing human in National Socialism or Heidegger's sense of *being*. The reduction to a totalizing myth is a reduction to precisely what lies outside of individual humanity, that is, the notion of blind 'oneness' that precedes the human and will *not allow* the human to come forth in the form in which humanity has *already* come forth. When form is reduced to a crude biologism that begins with a particular race, then we see that Arendt is

[1069] Wallace Stevens, 'Of Modern Poetry', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 219.
[1070] Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 30.
[1071] Wallace Stevens, 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words', *The Necessary Angel, Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 656.

correct to consider that the first race outlined for annihilation is the first group in a list that ends with the last human being (including the aggressors themselves).[1072] Arendt notes of totalitarianism that:

> far from wielding its power in the interest of one man, it is quite prepared to sacrifice everybody's vital immediate interests to the execution of what it assumes to be the law of History or the law of Nature.[1073]

First and last race or class are one, as the very existence of such a mobilized reduction had already declared war on every last human being. For Arendt: 'In the language of the Nazis, the never-resting, dynamic "will of the Fuehrer ... becomes the "supreme law" in a totalitarian state.'[1074]

The 'artist tyrants' labour under the delusion that there will be anything left of humanity reduced to 'Necessity', from which to paint what 'humanity' will be. Altieri wants it both ways, suggesting that: 'We have to align entirely with necessity, but at a distance, in another tree'.[1075] But the totalizing ground of the myth does not allow for compromise, and nor does Stevens. Enforcing old and violent mythology as a fundamental ground of existence, in an effort to destroy the perceived errors of the present, is an act of violence. Arendt notes that: 'From the totalitarian point of view, the fact that men are born and die can be only regarded as an annoying interference with higher forces.'[1076] Arendt suggests further that:

> It [totalitarian government] substitutes for the boundaries and channels of communication between individual men a band of iron which holds them so tightly together that it is as though their plurality had disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions. [1077]

[1072] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego, New York & London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1979), p. 464.
[1073] Ibid., p. 365.
[1074] Ibid., pp. 461 - 462.
[1075] Charles Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Modernism and After*, p. 146.
[1076] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 466.
[1077] Ibid., pp. 465 - 466.

Hitler had said in a speech to the SA: 'All that you are, you are through me; all that I am, I am through you alone.' [1078] Stevens had only used the 'mind of winter' to destroy 'romantic tenements/ Of rose and ice', but he recognized that mind as synonymous with Hitler's mind:

> In the land of war. More than the man, it is
> A man with the fury of a race of men,
> A light at the centre of many lights,
> A man at the centre of men.[1079]

Of this 'major man' Arendt says:

In the iron band of terror, which destroys the plurality of men and makes out of many the One who unfailingly will act as though he himself were part of the course of history or nature, a device has been found not only to liberate the historical and natural forces, but to accelerate them to a speed they never would reach if left to themselves. [1080]

In this context we can agree with Levinas in refusing 'any Christological account of the other' when the 'Other' is proved to be no more than a man seeking to bind humanity to blind 'natural forces' that only destroy life.[1081]

Vattimo's efforts to produce an 'accomplished nihilism' denote a reluctance to view the origin of his own structures of thought. I would argue that the 'oneness' of this *mythos* informs Gadamer's connection of art work and audience, and shows the truth-telling function of the work of art to be a collapse into the acceptance of *mythos* as 'truth'. This reconnects us to the first chapter where we noted that in *Truth and Method* Gadamer had said that: 'In that our hermeneutical theory seeks to show the interconnection of event and understanding, it sends us back to Parmenides'.[1082] Equally it was Stevens who had referred to 'the supremacy of a figure like

[1078] Ibid., p. 325.
[1079] Wallace Stevens, 'Man and Bottle', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 218.
[1080] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* , p. 466.
[1081] Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political*, p. 123.
[1082] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 456.

Parmenides'.[1083] By linking 'event and understanding', Gadamer suggests that his theory 'sends us back to Parmenides'. Stevens says of the 'first idea' that:

> It satisfies
> Belief in an immaculate beginning
>
> And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,
> To an immaculate end. We move between these points:
> From that ever-early candor to its late plural
>
> And the candor of them is the strong exhilaration
> Of what we feel from what we think, of thought
> Beating in the heart, as if blood newly came,
>
> An elixir, an excitation, a pure power.
> The poem, through candor, brings back a power again
> That gives a candid kind to everything.[1084]

A historical dialogue that mines poetic myth is precisely how Adorno and Horkheimer had presented the inevitable development of 'enlightenment' thinking. The act of pressing back with the notion of a 'oneness' of *being* over and against the liberty of the *already* existent 'self', that Levinas sees in the form of the face, remains caught in a web of mythical concepts ('a pure power') that constitute Stevens' poetic 'rock', the satisfaction of 'belief'.

We have seen how such a position allowed post-Kantian philosophers and poets to attempt to reconnect with the 'thing-in-itself', but that such a reconnection was performed at the expense of the 'Other', as a violent reduction to 'otherness'. I have argued that it is only by tracing the roots of that thinking, of restoring its status as a historical *concept* generated through the human mind, that we can illuminate its irrational, mythological foundation, a foundation that Stevens used to structure his complete 'rock', his universal, self-perpetuating 'supreme fiction', and the universal

[1083] A Letter to José Rodríguez Feo, April 6th, 1945. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 495.
[1084] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 330 - 331.

freedoms of ‘major man’. The modern work of art becomes the ground of a new world for this mode of thought, only because the work of art is a fiction. The acceptance of a fiction as the ground of all reality forgets that, in Levinasian terms, the human face precedes the moment of the work of art.

Conclusion

Mythos and Literature - Violence And Language

> The englistered woman is now seen
> In an isolation, separate
> From the human in humanity[1085]

What is the poet based upon? Heidegger has an inadvertent answer to this that we can apply to Stevens. He writes:

> *mythos* and *logos* are not, as our current historians of philosophy claim, placed into opposition by philosophy as such; on the contrary, the early Greek thinkers (Parmenides, fragment VIII) are precisely the ones to use *mythos* and *logos* in the same sense.[1086]

That *logos* ultimately derives from *mythos*, and that *mythos* is 'philosophical' is the perfect evocation of Stevens' poetry. This fact has not been evident in critics who seek solely for a more contemporary comparative 'philosophy' in Stevens, as in the case of Ziarek, Critchley, Hines and Bové. To connect the philosophical to the mythological in Stevens is essential for understanding Stevens' solipsism, his emphasis upon reduction, and his apparent conflation of anthropomorphic mythic structures. To read Stevens as connected to just philosophy, will miss the dominant symbiosis with *mythos*. To read only mythical structures will miss the 'philosophical', pre-Socratic locution.

The analysis undertaken has attempted to show in what way Stevens was in line with post-Kantian philosophers and poets in viewing art as a means of experiencing the 'thing-in-itself'. Further that, contrary to Critchley's analysis, the

[1085] Wallace Stevens, 'The Sail of Ulysses', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 467.
[1086] Martin Heidegger, 'What Calls for Thinking?', *Basic Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 375 - 376.

development of this 'experience' owed as much to the poetic ontology of the pre-Socratics as to romanticism, which itself showed signs of utilizing pre-Socratic thought and poetry, not least in the form of Hölderlin, who Heidegger had said was 'deeply wedded to the spirit of Heraclitus.'[1087] In fact, it was through the Heraclitean sense of language as part of nature, that Stevens viewed poems as 'things in themselves' that could be mined for the 'first idea'. Such conceptions of a connection to the ontological through art have also allowed us to demonstrate how Lentricchia's critique of the social detachment of Stevens' poetry does not allow for the ontological reduction that Stevens enacts in 'engaging' with 'society'. What the analysis demonstrated was how potentially violent such a reduction was against the individual, despite its efforts to 'heal' the *polemos* of division in the oneness of *being*.

In a move away from Bloom and Riddel, who have read Stevens as the anti-realist poet of the imagination, Critchley wants to emphasize Stevens as a poet who engages with reality *through* the imagination.[1088] However, it is because Critchley is more concerned with Stevens' poetry as a possible solution to the problem of epistemology, that he detaches his analysis from the mythological elements in Stevens' poetry, which in reality connect with Stevens' assessment of 'the supremacy of a figure like Parmenides' and demonstrate in what way Stevens is collapsing the mind/world division.[1089] Mind and world were connected in Stevens' poetry from his first collection, because both were one in *being* and *becoming*, which in conceptual origin are the two aspects of the mythical 'goddess', and are presented as such. In other words, despite the deft handling of the philosophy that Critchley

[1087] Gregory Fried, *Heidegger's Polemos – From Being to Politics*, p. 29.
[1088] Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are – Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, p. 26 - 27.
[1089] A Letter to José Rodríguez Feo, April 6th, 1945. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 495.

provides, Stevens is not 'philosophically significant' in terms of allowing us to 'cast away' 'the basic problem of epistemology'.[1090] Rather, Stevens grounds the imagination and reality in a myth and enacts a rebirth into that totalizing mythology, to become the master of all the life in the world, an anti-realist act of the mind which subjects reality to a violent reduction.

The question of the intertwined nature of *mythos* and *logos* for the pre-Socratics, has in itself, not gone unnoticed by Bloom. In *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, Bloom raises the question of 'rhetoric' and its meaning for the history of philosophy and poetry. In the concluding chapter he says:

> If Empedocles indeed founded rhetoric, we might say that rhetoric rose out of shamanism or religious poetry, and so was more oracular than oratorical in its origins. But there is the fine speculation of Eric Havelock, in his *Preface to Plato*, that Empedocles was Plato's precursor in trying to wrest language from the image-thinking of the poets to the concept-thinking of the philosophers, or from *doxa* (opinion) to truth. Can we surmise that Empedocles invented rhetoric to help him in this transformation? Yet, though Plato tries to move the trope from Homer's figures of will to a figure of knowing, rhetoric remains incurably poetic, a drive toward will-to-identity rather than toward a knower/known dualism. Tropes are perverse; they are *para-phusis*, unnatural, deviant.[1091]

By taking Bloom's position as our point of departure, rather than as a conclusion, and questioning into the implications of the 'conceptual' links between Stevens and the pre-Socratics, we have seen that it is Parmenides who raises *doxa* (the seeming that is intimately linked to 'opinion') to the status of *in being* ('truth'). Ultimately it is this model that illuminates the much larger universe of Stevens' conception of 'reality'. A trope like 'major man' is 'unnatural' because for the pre-Socratics, and through their influence, for Heidegger, 'trope' was never considered to be *para-phusis*, but rather, in a way that could not wholly be controlled, was considered to be

[1090] Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are – Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, p. 30.
[1091] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, p. 388.

part of *how phusis fundamentally opens up*. As we have seen, trope inhabited the pre-Socratic sense of the 'One' (as 'Ananke') before being *wrested* into 'philosophy'. To express poetry as completely aligned with the philosophy of the 'One' is not to use philosophy as *materia poetica*, rather the work of art itself will be where the *mythos* that lies beneath that philosophy is *at use*, producing its original effects. It was already there. It is only through an understanding of the affinities of Stevens and the pre-Socratic tradition that we have been able to see the full and primary influence of the non-rational origins that account for the violence and solipsism, as characteristic of the opening up of oneness, over and against the 'existent'.

Heidegger notes that:

> *Mythos* and *logos* became separated and opposed only at the point where neither *mythos* nor *logos* can keep to its pristine essence. In Plato's work this separation has already taken place. Historians and philologists, by virtue of a prejudice modern rationalism adopted from Platonism, imagine that *mythos* was destroyed by *logos*.[1092]

The epoch of time before Plato is the ultimate ground of the machinery of Stevens' poetry of 'reality'. Critics of Stevens have not always appreciated this breach in fundamental modes of thinking. There has been a tendency to attempt to explain Stevens on one side of the breach, while he was clearly standing upon the other. Bloom has pointed to that breach, but it is only through questioning into its ultimate relationship with the pre-Socratics that we can understand its violent nature and its link to 'philosophy' within Stevens' verse. In questioning into it, it is clear how this same violence is connected with the 'violence' that Levinas and Derrida had seen in Heidegger's 'reduction of metaphysics'. It is also clear why Ziarek, Hines and Bové, among others, have sensed a Heideggerean parallel in Stevens.

[1092] Martin Heidegger, 'What Calls for Thinking?', *Basic Writings*, p. 376

Bloom has said that: 'To deconstruct a poem would mean to uncover whatever its rhetoricity conveyed, even if the poem, the poet, and the tradition of its interpretation showed no overt awareness of what implicitly was revealed by such word-consciousness.'[1093] Stevens' poetry would suggest that it has collapsed the 'religious', the 'mythic' into 'philosophic concepts', collapsed 'Apollo' into the difficulty of the sun in its *being*, which is what 'Apollo', or any conception of a 'god' always 'was' for Stevens. However, as we have seen, the pre-Socratic sense of *being* was born out of an even older mythological lineage than the Greeks, and that it was the pre-Socratics who had retained the precise mythic structure under different names, as Adorno, Kingsley and Guthrie have argued. This means that the relationship of *logos* to *mythos* in Stevens is unstable, a fact which Stevens' verse exploits as a means of generating drama, as with the dominant revival of 'Ananke' in 'The Auroras'. It is the precise dilemma that Guthrie faced in trying to equate Parmenides' use of 'shamanism' as at once religious and allegorical.[1094]

When the 'revolutionary' 'vigour' of modernism 'Must' make it new, as an act connected to *being* as a 'oneness', then it is only ever re-presenting what is old and bound to mythology. In other words, a modernism founded upon the thought of *being* is only ever an act of opening the myth once again, in a way that shows modernism to be historically grounded, while the myth remains untouched by change, not new at all. It is myth remade *again* as it was, not a making new of the myth itself. Rather, it is the effort to remould a changed reality to the myth. When Heidegger opposes the Platonic tradition, he opposes it for its subjective view of metaphysics. Yet 'learn to know thyself' was also inscribed in the pronaos

[1093] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, pp. 385 - 386.
[1094] W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Volume II - The Presocratic Tradition From Parmenides to Democritus*, p. 13.

(forecourt) of the temple of Apollo, at Delphi. If we read Stevens through Platonic eyes, whether we are aware of it or not, we will divide the myth within the terms of the myth, which itself remains a unity. However, if we unlearn Platonism, we can see the connection of Heidegger and Plato in the 'Mythical Preliminary Stage of Philosophy'.[1095] It is only from this vista that we can step completely outside of the terms entertained in the introduction, of Hillis Miller's perspective of Stevens critics as either:

> Socratic, theoretical, or canny critics, on the one hand, and Apollonian/Dionysian, tragic, or uncanny critics, on the other.[1096]

For Hillis Miller the struggle that exists between the Socratic and tragic critical approaches finds 'a fit emblem' 'in the *polemos* of Apollo and Dionysus'.[1097] Criticism only adds to 'the rock' for Hillis Miller, and in terms of the dichotomy above we can completely agree with him when he states that: 'One can never escape from the labyrinth because the activity of escaping makes more labyrinth'.[1098] However, the preceding thesis may reply with Levinas that the 'face' of the 'Other' is in advance of all myth making and breaks down all *totalities*.

Stevens, at times, wrote poetry entirely at the direction of an ontological position, which he believed to be inherently poetic. The implications that this holds for language are, as described in 'The Creations of Sound', that language changes from 'meaning', to 'opening', from the description derived from the ego ('I wandered lonely as a cloud'[1099]) to *aletheia* ('It comes about').[1100] For Stevens, 'The

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[1095] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The pre-Platonic Philosophers*, p. 10.
[1096] J. Hillis Miller, *Theory Now and Then*, p. 121.
[1097] Ibid., p. 122.
[1098] Ibid., p. 123.
[1099] William Wordsworth, *The Works of William Wordsworth* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 1994), p. 187.
[1100] Wallace Stevens, 'The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 49.

word must be the thing it represents otherwise it is a symbol.'[1101] Further, 'poetry must be irrational.'[1102] This is why Vaught Brogan senses that Stevens' 'sister of the Minotaur' is the 'madwoman in a maze, specifically, a linguistic maze.'[1103] Language, in the hands of an ontologically conscious poet like Stevens, comes after *being* and *becoming*. It is born of them, not of the ego as the poet is 'flicked by feeling'. The connection of Stevens' universal 'supreme fiction' to Gadamer's universal hermeneutics is in Gadamer's belief that '*Being that can be understood is language.*'[1104]

Vaught Brogan has noted of lines from 'Description Without Place', which we said was written in context of Stevens reading about and reflecting upon Parmenides, that it 'celebrates what could be accurately called a "logocentric theory" of poetry, that is, that words are ultimately grounded in *being*.'[1105] In this respect, *being* and *becoming* in Stevens replaced the intellect as the source of poetry, producing the 'poem of poems', operating to the 'philosophic theme'.[1106] As a result, any attempt to read a poetry that is ontological in primacy according to the outward 'meaning' of the words on the page, will never fully open an interpretation of 'the poem'. In this regard, poetry for Stevens 'consists of more than lies on the surface.'[1107] It serves to explain the impenetrable nature of Stevens' poetry and why the underlying *concepts* need to be identified in context of a more traditional interpretation.

[1101] Wallace Stevens, 'Adagia', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 907.
[1102] Wallace Stevens, 'Materia Poetica', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 919.
[1103] Jacqueline Vaught Brogan, *The Violence Within The Violence Without - Wallace Stevens and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Poetics*, p. 104.
[1104] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 470.
[1105] Jacqueline Vaught Brogan, *The Violence Within The Violence Without - Wallace Stevens and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Poetics*, p. 10.
[1106] Wallace Stevens, 'A Collect of Philosophy', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 854.
[1107] Wallace Stevens, 'Adagia', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 902.

If the *archê* of *phusis* is established in primacy then the function of language is only to allow the 'first idea' to be disclosed at the 'centre'. In that sense language, in the hands of Stevens, becomes syntactically peculiar and stylistically plastic in order to allow a reduction to *being* and *becoming*. In short, language becomes a succession of breaks, doors, gates, bolts, bars, keys and locks, preventing or providing access to what lies 'beyond', or in actuality, the eruption of that far older, irrational pool of 'meaning' which is bound up in a web of *concepts*. Stevens expressed his own technique as follows: 'The thing said must be the poem not the language used in saying it.'[1108] Though language is obviously the final resting place of the expression of poetry, for Stevens it is not the fullest sense of the poem, which itself is only a part of the larger poetic life, what Stevens calls the 'poetic spirit'.[1109] Heidegger, as another proponent of 'spirit', was adamant that it was a more careful use of language that was required to elucidate the renewal of an authentic *being*, and that poets were advanced practitioners in the art. For Heidegger, language 'is the house of the truth of Being.'[1110] Further, that it 'is language that tells us about the essence of a thing, provided that we respect language's own essence.'[1111]

It is conceivable for the words of a poem to point to a subject or object, to shed light upon that object, essentially, what Stevens criticised Carlos Williams for.[1112] In the case where the thought of *being* has given birth to the words of poetry, then the totalizing opacity of *being* is what the words illuminate in primacy. Language is the end of expression for this mode of poetry, not the beginning, which is why language is a 'crust' or a 'shed' skin to Stevens as we have seen. We may

[1108] Wallace Stevens, 'Adagia', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 905.
[1109] Wallace Stevens, 'Adagia', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 912.
[1110] Martin Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism', *Basic Writings*, p. 223.
[1111] Martin Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking', *Basic Writings*, p. 348.
[1112] Wallace Stevens, 'Rubbings of Reality', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 815.

surmise that as the *poesis* of Ezra Pound's *Cantos* might be called *mimēsis*, in its effort to incorporate an astonishing range of history into poetry, then Stevens' *poesis* might be referred to as an event of appearing that seeks to effortlessly touch a conceptual sense of complete *being*. This is a generalisation of the *Cantos* that will not stand up on its own, but perhaps on closer analysis, such apparent differences might account for the ground of Marjorie Perloff's sense of a gap between Stevens and Pound?[1113] In any case the preceding thesis has argued that we create poems, but we cannot manipulate the ground of a conceptual *being* except as a delusional experience that manifests itself as the destruction of the existent 'Other'.

The illumination of only the ontological is precisely where the 'human', the rational, the existent, cannot go. The danger, according to Levinas, in placing the thought of *being* in absolute primacy, is that it causes the inevitable reduction of the 'Other' to 'otherness', which for Levinas amounts to violence. The mythological, historical origins of the notion of reducing a human being to mere *being*, which Vattimo is reluctant to revisit, provides fertile ground for its irrational violence. It seems clear that Stevens was subject to these notions and that this accounts for why his verse is solipsistic and reductive. It is why violence is at play within his poetry.

According to Levinas and Derrida, the 'first idea' as a 'oneness' is only ever a violent *totality*, a 'reduction of metaphysics' that is itself derived from a myth. Stevens, like Heidegger, attempted to use that myth, but with a contradictory slight-of-hand, as if myth could be used without the resulting work being mythological in

[1113] Marjorie Perloff, 'Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?', *New Literary History*, 13 (1982), pp. 485 – 495. See also: Glen MacLeod, ed., *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, Vol. 26 No. 2 (Fall 2002) Special Issue: Wallace Stevens and Ezra Pound.

kind. Stevens defines his conception of the nature of poetry in the introduction to *The Necessary Angel* as follows:

A force capable of bringing about fluctuations in reality in words free from mysticism is a force independent of one's desire to elevate it. It needs no elevation. It has only to be presented, as best one is able to present it.[1114]

He continues by saying that the essays of *The Necessary Angel* have nothing to do with 'criticism', 'philosophy' or literature, but rather, 'with one of the enlargements of life', which amounted to his definition of poetry.[1115] It was in 'only' presenting this 'force' ('with the least possible manipulation') that Stevens was unlocking the *totality* of the concept of *being*, and all of its mythological *history* that had been adapted by the pre-Socratics.[1116] He seems to have thought he was opening something equal to *being* as *infinity*, which would provide an enlarged freedom for the scope of 'humanity'.[1117] In reality however, the infinite renewal of *being* as a 'oneness' is only infinite bondage to a conceptual *totality*.

In Derrida's terms, when a system lacks a centre, 'play' becomes infinite. When a system has a centre, 'play' is restrained.[1118] For Stevens, as for the post-theological era, when God was no longer considered to be *the* centre, the system lacked a centre and it is with this thought of 'nothing' that Stevens' 'saxophones' begin to squiggle, as 'play' becomes 'infinite'. However, Stevens ultimately attempted to replace God with the conception of 'Ananke', or the 'Goddess of Complete Being', the 'goddess' of all bonds who was conceptually made whole by her dying and reborn sun 'god'. 'She' was shown to be the original ground of the

[1114] Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 639 - 640.
[1115] Ibid., p. 640.
[1116] A Letter to William Rose Benét, January 24th, 1933. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 264.
[1117] Wallace Stevens, 'A Collect of Philosophy', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 856.
[1118] Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', *Writing and Difference*, pp. 278 - 293.

ontological conception of *being* and *becoming* passed down from the pre-Socratics. The peculiar nature of this particular fatalistic mythology is to perpetuate the static and the variable in equal measure, at the same time. As such the centre was replaced by a concept that as a fiction, allowed for infinite 'play' (thus resisting rationalism and religious structures), but which also provided for the need for a fixed centre in which Stevens could *believe*, willingly. However, the tensions that this old structure 'played' out from its origins, was in fact a universal violence enacted according to a violent and dehumanizing myth.

Bloom says: 'Poems lie primarily against three adversaries', themselves, other poems and time.[1119] He questions: 'Why do we believe one liar and not another?' Answering:

> Strong poems strengthen us by teaching us *how to talk to ourselves*, rather than how to talk to others. Satan is strongest when he talks to himself, like his Shakespearean precursors, though an immense loss in self-delight is felt when we move from Iago to Satan. Against whom does Satan lie most persuasively: himself, his precursor, time?[1120]

Bloom's conclusion is that: 'Deconstruction touches its limit because it cannot admit such a question.'[1121] When *being* is elevated to the status of 'ultimate truth', and poetry is reduced to an opening of *being* as 'truth', the effect is to *legitimate* what is not true by virtue of its status of 'in *being*'. In other words, the moment of poetic opening is presented as 'truth' that precedes extant humanity. It is because *being* is used to justify, that everything becomes subject to *being*. If the multiplicity of *already* existent beings is reduced to the 'One' of *being*, then all multiplicity, all individuality, is annihilated under the conceptual sway of that oneness. As Stevens says, the poet would 'have the power to destroy us. If there was, or if we believed

[1119] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, pp. 386 - 387.
[1120] Ibid., p. 387.
[1121] Ibid., p. 387.

that there was, a center, it would be absurd to fear or to avoid its discovery.'[1122] It is the absurdity that demonstrates Stevens' unthinking suppression of both origins and implications in favour of the desire to make it new. Thus it was with the same slight regard for anything other than 'the right sensation', that 'Ananke' as a product of the imagination became 'that thing' in which he could believe, as an 'improvisation' or an 'importation'.[1123] Stevens' achieved the satisfaction of belief, but in achieving it he opened the 'reduction of metaphysics' and the *play* of violence.

In conceiving of and attempting to manipulate *being* (to become 'the master of all the life in the world') Stevens automatically makes *being* a historical concept, changing 'it' from what 'it' 'is' in the extant presence of the form of the 'Other', to a regenerated piece of history that can be manipulated by the will of 'the mind of one man'.[1124] This mythological concept is shown to be a mythological hijacking of the concept of *being* and has historical affiliations with violence and the totalizing of the 'Other'. Adorno suggests that: 'Heidegger's rudiments of material ontology are temporal; they have come to be, and they will pass as Scheler's did before.'[1125]

I agree with Bloom that, 'The limits of a purely rhetorical criticism, however advanced, are established by its inevitable reductiveness, its necessary attempt to see poetry as being a conceptual rhetoric, *and nothing more*.'[1126] Indeed, who do we believe? If a poetry is itself reductive in primacy, in both origin and meaning, and this reductiveness is according to Levinas and Derrida only ever violent, then is that poetry more than 'conceptual rhetoric', or does its inherent 'poetic' value take precedence over the implications of its 'meaning'? Further, how far can we critique

[1122] Wallace Stevens, 'The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet', *The Necessary Angel, Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 670.
[1123] A Letter to Hi Simons, August 28th, 1940. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 370.
[1124] A Letter to Hi Simons, August 8th, 1940. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 360.
[1125] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 108.
[1126] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, p. 386.

Stevens when Western metaphysics itself has its origins in poetry, as Schelling understood? We can consider this by assessing Stevens' own musings: 'When we find in poetry that which gives us a momentary existence on an exquisite plane, is it necessary to ask the meaning of the poem?'[1127] We might reply with: 'If Orphism were a philosophy, one would say it was a philosophy whose ethic was made duly dependent on its metaphysic.'[1128] The realization of the 'exquisite plane' in Stevens' poetry reduces the 'Other' to a concept reminiscent of Parmenides' interpretation of *being*, that which 'is immovable in the bonds of mighty chains, without beginning and without end'.[1129] Hillis Miller writes of Stevens' thinking that: 'All entities come together in the realm of things as they are, the realm of the "is" which yokes them together in the unity of being. These equivalences might be run together in a chain'.[1130] Adorno and Horkheimer contend that:

> The more the machinery of thought subjects existence to itself, the more blind its resignation in reproducing existence. Hence enlightenment returns to mythology, which it never really knew how to elude. For in its figures mythology had the essence of the *status quo*: cycle, fate, and domination of the world reflected as the truth and deprived of hope.[1131]

The more consoling news, for Levinas as a post-metaphysical thinker, is that the form of the face still stands. The individual being of our mortal existences is always and already in advance of any conceptual *totality* conceived from 'the mind of one man'.

[1127] Wallace Stevens, 'The Irrational Element in Poetry', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 786.
[1128] W.K.C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, p. 73.
[1129] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, p. 175.
[1130] J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality*, p. 275.
[1131] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 27.

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